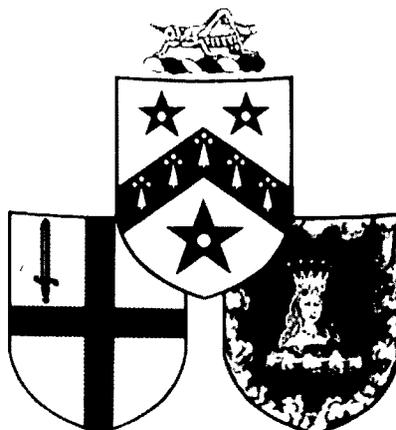


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MUSIC

Lecture 4

**SHOULD WE PAY THE PIPER? ISSUES OF ARTISTIC
PATRONAGE**

by

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Should We Pay the Piper? Issues of Artistic Patronage

Professor Piers Hellawell

If this series is about the ownership of music today, about the contract between the listener and provider, then part of my purpose is to offer a more realistic view of what the composer actually does. Today I am concerned with 'ownership' in its most practical and literal sense. It cannot be said too often, for example, that composers are not people so filled with passion for what they do that there is no need to pay them - yet that is a hard assumption to shift, even today!

No-one has expressed today's composer's difficulties with more clarity than Elliott Carter - now the senior figure of modern art music, but a mere 38 years old when he wrote the following, with his mature output still to come. Carter saw, even in 1946, what he had taken on in becoming a composer. This is an extensive quotation compiled from an article The Composer's Viewpoint:

"It seems that everything is a problem to the composer. We always seem to be troubleshooting, trying to explain ourselves to ourselves and others. ... There is, however, one just one simple fact, I think, on which all the problems of serious composers hinge. What almost any composer worth his salt would like to write, what teachers, critics and audiences agree is what they want to hear, is interesting and durable music. I mean by this, music that stands on its own feet and says what it has to say so well that it can be heard many times with growing interest and understanding. ... The kind of music I am talking about does not grow in a desert. It needs encouragement. ... We composers think our desire to write durable music a far-sighted one, though to our performing and publishing friends it often seems very stubborn of us to take things so seriously, turning out sonatas and symphonies that have few chances of performances and fewer of sales...." yet, Carter goes on to point out,

"Composers, as you know, are often people of vision. They are willing to make long-term investments of their own time and their creative effort, believing that only in this way will anything good ever be accomplished. But they are surrounded by a society that insists on quick returns for its money, and in the process is continually meeting with the disappointing fact that successes fostered in this way are transient. When you think of how profitable the durable classics of music have been to everybody concerned, how much more profitable than any passing novelty, then you cannot understand why more performers, publishers and teachers are not out to foster new music of this level.

Most performers, for instance, treat all works of new music as novelty items, clamouring for first performances as if they did not believe the work could stand a second hearing. Composers are put on the spot by this and have to keep writing music, often more than they should, in order to remain before the public." (1)

Carter crams in enough truths here for an entire discussion, but I want to highlight his central point, that there is a persistent tension between the necessarily long time-scale in which a work of art music takes its place and what he calls 'this wasteful quest for novelty' on the part of the public mechanisms and their approaches to patronage. Pointing out the futility of this short-termism (as we would now call it), Carter deplores the failure of artistic mechanisms to learn from the evidence before them; while great works of the past continue to garner revenue for all involved, the penny never drops among modern regimes that maybe today's crop should be nurtured as a similar investment.

1 Carter, E 'The Composer's Viewpoint' in ed Bernard Collected Essays and Lectures 1937-95, Univ of Rochester Press 1994 p.3-4 (hereafter Carter, Collected Essays).

To take one example: every composer today knows that Carter is right – that it is easier to get commissions for new works than to get existing works into the everyday concert repertoire - though possibly things have improved since Carter wrote that article. But while the young composer is perforce eager to write to commission, whatever the likely shelf-life of the work, the more established in the profession find endless premieres frustrating. In no other business would senior figures countenance expending months of work on a single, 10-15' performance for a financial reward nowhere near commensurate with the hours involved; yet this happens all the time in music - for the economics of large-scale music-making make major scores even by some established composers a rarity after their premiere. How often in the UK (never mind elsewhere) do audiences hear *Time's Arrow* by Anthony Payne, *Scenes and Arias* by Nicholas Maw or *Madonna of Winter and Spring* by Jonathan Harvey? Anyone trying to promote such music knows that positive responses usually consist of a request for a new work.

EX Anthony Payne: from *Time's Arrow* (?)

I have had this experience on many occasions - most recently in 2000 – when offering a work to a suitable group, hoping for it to reach wider listenership: the performer responds positively by praising the work, but at once passes on to the consequent invitation "we liked it so much – how about a commission to write one for us?" In other words - "I'd like another of those, please!" In some cases this suits the composer - I accepted my most recent offer of that sort - but usually it is not what one needs most. It leaves the composer like a customer trying to get an adjustment to his toaster, who is told "it's cheaper to buy a new one". But it is not! Commissions involve raising several thousands of pounds, and if the source is the Lottery, then the body itself has to find 25%. The mere administration of such applications is a big burden in itself, servicing the demands of the modern fashion for box-ticking tokenism. Is the resilience of commissioning today in the UK really proof of idealism, of unswerving determination to support new work at any cost? I wonder. Idealism plays a part, even in these cynical times: there is a blind doctrine of commissioning, particularly among sympathetic performers – and of course we need commissioners, and do not want to deter them. Yet even the most committed among them rarely ask the question 'what do you really need as a composer?'. The festivals and larger organisations, meanwhile, are still dazzled by the caché surrounding involvement with New, as opposed to new, works, that obscures the considerable merits of taking up recent music; organisations are fixated upon being able to show in annual reports that they have 'commissioned new work'. There would seem to be no points awarded for a season of 2nd performances, or for steering resources into sustaining the concert life of commissions over a longer period - I have not so far encountered such a scheme, anyway.

Composers are never in my experience asked "would you prefer a performance of a recent work, or to write a new piece?" Getting existing works taken up by secondary artists (ie not those who commissioned them) requires a huge additional labour of promotion, not a little diplomacy and a large skip-full of good luck. How it would help if there were some external mechanism at least for this development, offering the realistic hope of a continuing 'life', to encourage the composer at work on a new piece.

While some improvement is under way in recent years, the notion of 'exclusivity' (2) has, by UK artists, been too often treated as a means not of promoting a work, but of stifling further performances! Bitter negotiations over restricting a new work's circulation still occur; I remember in 1985 having to grant a year's exclusivity on a work to a UK orchestra that performed it on the first two nights of that period only. I was lucky - there was at least a second performance! Their main aim was clearly to avoid credit being shared with any other group for as long as possible. Truly the amazing rarity today of shared commissions attests to the latent territorial instinct that is immanent in the commissioning act. It seems incredible that composers have stood for this, when what a work needs most in its infancy is the momentum of further hearings. A more enlightened orchestral commissioner recently waved aside my offer of exclusivity, telling me 'composers face enough difficulties getting things

played as it is'. We need more of that attitude - and that same chief executive sees scant purpose in isolated commissions, preferring to sustain a relationship with a composer so as to promote a sense of ownership within his audience (and orchestra).

Where organisations merely dabble in the creative process on which their composer embarks, there is effectively a mismatch between their short-termism and the necessarily long-term horizons of the composer.

This brings me back to Carter's words from the opening:

"what teachers, critics and audiences agree is what they want to hear is interesting and durable music. The kind of music I am talking about does not grow in a desert. It needs encouragement." Too often, the premiere is indeed an oasis in a desert, in which the new work is likely to starve. The obvious conclusion from the problems outlined is that there is a complete lack of understanding of the realities of composition on the part of some of those initiating it. This is correct, and the fog thickens as one moves further into the mysterious echelons of arts support.

Nothing illustrates this better than the time-scale for commissioning supported by UK bodies who fund new work. All such bodies set great store by the caveat that no project should be initiated before funding is agreed, no doubt to avoid litigation if a composer writes a piece only to find the expected commission refused. Yet the glacial speed at which commissioners make, and funding bodies process, applications makes it likely that such a project must often be undertaken, and even completed, long before such agreement is given. The bodies seem unable to take account of the likely work-load or other activity of the composer. Important questions are thus never asked. The first should be 'How long may it take you to create a work of this scale?', from which should follow 'When do you need the go-ahead, so as to be able to write such a work in time?' As a result, there is a frequent joke among composers whom you ask 'How's the piece going?': the reply is "'Just finished' and/or 'Just about to start', depending who you are". If we all held off putting pen to paper until every commission was agreed, 95% of new works would never reach their premiere. Until these funding processes get real, this fiction will be sustained. Composers know how long they need, and that late delivery will stick mud to them, whoever was to blame - so they have to get on with it. I was still trying to get the commissioner of a recent work to issue my contract when the date arrived laid down, in that same contract, for final delivery! I was thus agreeing at the same time to begin, and to finish, the same work. Why is composition beset with such practices? Why do company audits not address such client problems - for the composer is a client of a funding body, and the sums are not negligible. There are many unsung individual heroes in this field who have consistently pioneered composers, but it should not rest upon individuals.

The issuing of contracts is in fact a striking manifestation of the same approach. As my experience shows, few bodies set much store by this piece of paper any more. As it happens, the issuing contract is, or used to be, accompanied by payment of the first instalment. Yet not only do contracts rarely appear nowadays before work begins (and often not at all), but that first instalment is increasingly a rarity in itself. Could there be a link here? Few organisations, except the scrupulous BBC, are quick to offer that pre-composition instalment.

2 That is, the agreement to limit access to a new work to its original artists for a set period.

Needless to say, when I finally signed that belated contract just mentioned, I had received no money - yet the work was finished and in rehearsal. It is not unusual for the composer to have received no money whatever by the premiere, at which point pressing letters have to be written, by the publisher if the composer is lucky enough to have such representation, or by the embarrassed composer in person, who wants above all to maintain good relations and avoid jeopardising future associations, but who badly needs the due money. This is because the project has been conducted according to the famous gentleman's agreement', wherein the composer assumes he will get his premiere and fee, and the orchestra assumes the composer will deliver. Yet I can cite from memory a number of unhappy such 'agreements' that have foundered on a deficit of gentlemanliness - but very few where it has been the composer who has unexpectedly defaulted. Such problems surround not naive music clubs undertaking their first commission, as might be assumed, but some established organisations.

I believe this and the other problems are reflections of a view, still not extinct, that commissioning is an act of charity, an extravagant bit of patronage, rather than an investment in something that will require time to find its own feet. This view represents the obsession with short-term gain in artistic policy that Carter identified 50 years ago. While the timing mismatch that I outlined above stems largely from atrophy within bureaucratic mechanisms, it also reflects the insidious rationale that composers are 'driven' to compose - with the implications that 'it would be an insult to view them as working to order like an artisan/commissioning is a parallel rather than a prior process/they're writing anyway' - and so on!

By contrast, Carter was offering a mature approach that may seem unreal, even idyllic - yet it is based on hard logic and common sense. The pressure for fast return on investment means that, for today's hard-pressed commissioning executives, 'backing a winner' is about getting good critical coverage and 'delivering' to happy sponsors at the time of the premiere, as much as it is about longer-term keudos as the sponsor of a masterpiece. This is wholly understandable, and is the modern reality. Yet the returns on a well-planned commission need not lag behind, to be felt a generation or more later: few things give me more pleasure as a composer than being able to tell commissioners of my earlier pieces that this or that work has just been recorded, or toured, or broadcast overseas. Knowing that their commission has got into the repertoire should be hugely gratifying for them, and it must be a serious indicator that their support was & is a worthwhile exercise.

So longer-term support, whether planning later performances or maybe making strenuous efforts to record a new work, is not airy philanthropy but completion of a task undertaken; the premiere is simply not the end of the process. The baby is born, as it were, but is not yet up and about; new works need not midwives but godparents. The metaphor is apt, for consumer culture is a yet more voracious predator than short-termism and fashion: the work of art needs sheltering in its infancy. The market seeks to maximise consumption, so nurtures only the product that can be most easily consumed. Our new-born work fails that test - its criteria may be far from the stuff we can take in and suck dry at one hearing. That however, is unlikely to enrich the lives of successive generations, and forces that seek to define a work in advance for easy consumption are directly opposed to the aims of a serious work of art! The financial support for new art should thus be seen as a prelude to market survival, the first stage in a complex economic chain, rather than as a process of 'feather-bedding' that insulates art from market forces of choice. Any new piece of substance is going to wither and die if measured solely by market criteria, whose purposes lead to the standardised and shrinking language viewed by the modernist thinker Adorno as 'affirmation', when an audience knows in advance what it expects from an artefact and recognises it again and again. Richard Middleton uses a telling phrase, quoted in my 2nd talk, when pointing to this attempt to read a market: in *Studying Popular Music* he says

Companies certainly try to control demand, to channel it in known directions, but they are never sure of their market; the best they can do is to cover a spread... in order to minimise the risk." (my italics) (3)

It is the 'minimising of risk' (that of misreading demand) that is so at variance with the values of the individual work of art. For this reason, a stadium crowd hearing a commercial act do its carefully honed set are likely to respond in a corporate way - market research ensures that they are all somehow hearing 'the same concert' - whereas 120 people listening to a recital of Schubert's chamber music are somehow hearing 120 different concerts, in the sense that their responses are so highly personalised and thus so diverse.

The history of recent art music is littered with stories of heroes and villains in the commissioning process. Heroes must include anyone who had to deal with Wagner, while the composer's idea of a villain might include Paganini, who spurned the unflamboyant *Harold In Italy* written for him by Berlioz - though at least the piece got written for posterity. Again the public was the ultimate beneficiary of the abused composer, as it was with those legions of Romantic warhorses declared initially 'unplayable'.

I suspect, without being an authority, that some of these 19th-century problems stemmed from the choppy waters of uncertainty where the old flow of Classical patronage encountered the modern current of the emancipated composer-as-artist. For example the support for Haydn showed by Prince Nikolaus Esterhazy - definitely one of the heroes - had been a late manifestation of the dying order of enlightened despotism, and continuity, wherein Haydn was an employee, yet valued - rather as Bertie Wooster's Aunt Dahlia famously treasured her great chef Anatol, stopping at nothing to keep him in her employ.

Like everything else, this would change with Beethoven, never one to be treated like an employee, and not above offering the same score to two different patrons. His flattery was no longer the fulsome title dedication from Bach's generation, more the intellectual exchange between equals - a Russian folk-song embedded in the Quartets op 59 for Count Razumovsky, for example. By the time Wagner pursued a heated though probably chaste liaison with Mathilde Wesendonk, wife of one of his patrons, the social order had changed for ever. Possibly the business-man Otto Wesendonk would consider his cuckolding a price worth paying for the immortality of his name?

Many such figures are only remembered long after their day because we associate them with a work. Stravinsky's Concerto in Eb, which we all know as 'Dumbarton Oaks', is an unusual example. The gardens of its patrons, Mr & Mrs Robert Woods Bliss, may or may not have been a stimulus for its neo-Baroque elegance, so it is perhaps appropriate that their country estate, Dumbarton Oaks, tends to identify the work, rather than the Bliss name. Stravinsky's great body of work contains many good stories about commissions: my favourite concerns the 'Circus Polka' for a baby elephant. Stravinsky apparently asked Balanchine if the elephant would be young. 'Very young' he was assured, whereupon he agreed 'I'll do it'. 'Bessie' the elephant apparently later sent Stravinsky a telegram, after hearing a broadcast.

EX Circus Polka

The modern American orchestras, while far more deeply imbued with the free-market ethos than our own, still maintain support for living composers through the personal philanthropy that is part of American culture but not, as yet, our own: for too long British culture has hovered between complete state support - long since gone, if it ever existed - and vigorous private patronage, which is still seen as somehow tainted. This is the worst sort of British compromise.

Since Robert Wood Bliss many rich US citizens have paid for new work, supporting composers as diverse as new music itself. Recently I met an American who regularly supports an American orchestra in this regard. I asked about his recent commissioning support, and he replied "Let's see, we did Lutoslawski's 4th..." It must be a good feeling to have been godparent to such a work.

EX Lutoslawski *Symphony no 4*

Of course, these private donors are supporting leading figures. The true measure of a benign commissioning mechanism is not in its treatment of a great figure but of young composers, of little reputation and less clout. The problems outlined earlier about prompt contract and payment are especially acute for the young composer who is most vulnerable to 'gentleman's agreements': many of us have learned the hardest way about getting such agreements in writing, however embarrassing it is to insist. The insidious attitude here is that the young composer is being done a favour by involvement; this begins understandably, with musicians 'doing their best' in difficult circumstances, but can quickly entrench the feeling that the composer should be grateful for poor treatment.

It is the circumstances that encourage flawed commissioning that are the true villain. An idealistic young ensemble constantly seeks funding; its members are freshly out of conservatory and trying to make a living, while wanting to support their composer contemporaries from college. The group secures an engagement at a music club, for whom it represents a risk in itself, and even prevails on them to 'commission' a new piece - but the Society itself is short of funds, and neither its promised modest fee to the composer, nor the recording intended and promised by the group, materialises. The composer's sum total for his labour expended: one performance. Thus do good intentions pave a path to discreet exploitation. It will not do to say 'composers always had a bad deal - a far worse deal indeed, sometimes never even hearing their music'. Yet I grant that the picture I paint is certainly not new, for it echoes closely an account by the Swiss composer Honegger in 1924.

" A young composer contemplates with pride the score of his symphony, a year's strenuous work. Six years later, with the privilege of a performance in a big concert, he spends days and nights correcting the material, which was returned by the copyist a month late... But the composer was rash enough to include a saxophone. Luckily he still has time to correct his error and transcribe the forbidden part. The rehearsal days arrive - a sleepless night, due to the worry of not being on time at 9am. At 11am [after Wagner and Franck have taken the lion's share of time], they start to sight-read his work. Despite his efforts, it still contains many errors. The players rudely point them out to him. He humbly apologises.

At last the symphony is played, not very well because of insufficient rehearsal. The public is politely indifferent. As the composer had been given only two tickets, he bought seats for his friends. His friends, to show their judgement is not influenced by their sympathy, tear the work apart... The majority, who did not come to the concert and who do not know the composer, do not talk of it. His younger colleagues envy him: 'You were LUCKY to have a performance at X....' " (4)

Complimenting as it does the ideals of Elliott Carter with which I began, this glum picture represents the embodiment of a reality that composers, most of whom will know it from experience, hope to leave behind for ever.

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4 Honegger, Arthur from La Revue Nouvelle, quoted in Spratt, G *The Music of Arthur Honegger*, Cork UP 1987 p.223-4