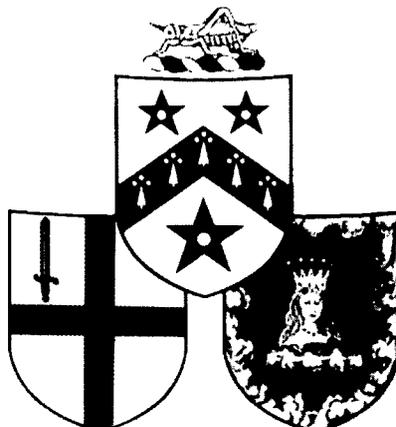


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MUSIC

Lecture 3

**A FAREWELL SYMPHONY: WILL THE LAST LISTENER
PLEASE TURN OUT THE LIGHT?**

by

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15 December 2000

GRESHAM COLLEGE

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Music of the Last Century: Will the last listener please turn out the light

[EX] denotes musical excerpt

Professor Piers Hellawell

My first two talks saw the audience and composer of recent art music glaring at one another, both in a way victims of a broken contract. Today I want to examine the challenge this has left to those of us who present new music in the aftermath. Is it possible to re-engage an audience that has invested its ownership elsewhere?

In a way this challenge is unique to our own age; it is the modern inheritance of an unprecedented journey into abstruse expression, by an avant-garde that was resentful of the too-common currency of music's post-Romantic vernacular. From the Marxist standpoint of the critic Adorno, this secession was a stance not just against worn currency but against coinage worn smooth by commercial (i.e. popular music) exploitation. As Richard Middleton paraphrases this stance, "only the radical avant-garde has resisted this situation (loss of musical autonomy in favour of mass production), and that at the price of social isolation and deliberate incomprehensibility: the only way left to refuse the market." (1)

This bizarre state of affairs serves to remind us that huge changes have taken place in the social ownership of contemporary music. It may be easy to imagine that everything was serene and idyllic before the isolation of the avant-garde, but we should remember that the bond between composer and audience has been constantly redefining itself over the whole course of Western music: the listener has been a monk, or a master-craftsman, a princeling, or a bourgeois merchant, a salon groupie or a Viennese banker. Furthermore, these listeners have demanded very different things of the music they supported - to draw attention to their nobility, to assist worship, to oil the works of social interchange at a party or to arouse Romantic sensibilities. In this context, it may be hard even to assert that support for new music has 'vanished'; perhaps it is fairer to say that it has evolved for the needs of each and every age. The problem may be that we have less idea than any previous age what we need from art music composers.

This situation, of course, can be turned by composers to our advantage: an audience without a clear idea of social context can be steered and educated, in a way that patrons would have resisted in the days when composers were artisans using the tradesmen's entrance. For this reason there are grounds to hope that a better contract may evolve, or already be evolving - but the rupture of the mid 20th-century contract can only be seen as a highly negative and sterile situation, one that all of us should strive to leave behind.

We saw at the end of my previous talk that the 18th-century public's ownership of, and familiarity with, the musical mainstream was equivalent to that around popular musics today, rather than equating to today's art music. Thus the idea of initiating a listener into a work, as if its mysteries were a code to be unscrambled, is absurd in the context of 18th Century Classicism. The dedications made by Emmanuel Bach and Mozart to 'connoisseurs and amateurs alike' on their works make it plain that the intricacies of their art were seen as subtleties within a comprehensible framework - icing on the cake rather than cake itself, as it were. If they could be appreciated, so much the better.

1 Middleton, R *Studying Popular Music*, OUPress 1990, p.36

The notion of initiation remains absurd as recently as when applied to Brahms. On the one hand, no Romantic master commands such analytical respect: witness Schoenberg's own article from 1947, 'Brahms the Progressive', in which he talks up Brahms' craft and conscious workmanship: " There is no doubt that Brahms believed in working out the ideas which he called 'gifts of grace'. Hard labour is, to a trained mind, no torture, but rather a pleasure."(2)

Yet it is hard to conceive of Brahms, who destroyed his private sketches, lecturing the good people of Hamburg about the fruits of this toil, such as his long-term harmonic projection or his asymmetrical melodies - except through the medium of the music itself.

EX end of Brahms: Quintet for piano and strings op 34 Schoenberg's own verbal advocacy for his musical path was launched belatedly, only after many wounds sustained in the concert hall. In the article with its self-explanatory title 'How One Becomes Lonely', in 1947, he made the point that "I have not discontinued composing in the same style... only that I do it better than before; it is more concentrated, more mature." (3)

The surprising discovery that there was a reception problem launched Schoenberg on a programme of self-justification that lasted the rest of his life. This discovery overthrew the notion that a profound tradition amongst his audience would see them through his innovations, and caused him, as I explored in my first talk, to dwell upon arguments of continuity in his writings. From here on in the modern age came the recognition among avant-garde composers that powerful forces of reaction were dragging against them, and thence alienation and entrenchment.

Thus the notion of 'musical explanation' itself is thus really a modern concept, born of a modernist construct of music as a coded ritual from which the audience may well feel excluded through insufficient knowledge. A remark by Boulez in the 1950s is revealing: he regretted that the scoring of his radical Polyphonie X did not adequately direct the listener to minute rhythmic permutations. This tells us both that conscious perception of such minute particles was a priority for the composer, and that he thought their perception a realistic possibility.

Once it becomes accepted that expert knowledge is needed for gaining entry to a new piece, the obvious next step is to offer some kind of initiation - and the pre-concert talk is born.

This historical process does not preclude earlier instances of audience resistance - as when Weber declared that Beethoven was 'ripe for the madhouse', for example. Yet exasperation of that sort sprang from the affront to a norm, the threat to what Adorno calls 'affirmation', that is - reassurance for the listener. So 'difficult' works offered a challenge to the extent to which they lay outside a norm. It was perhaps inevitable that this situation would broaden into one of wider reception problems: but as recently as Schoenberg's works before 1910, audience frustration and savage critical reception indicated that expectations were clearly still present to be violated - witness George Dyson's dire warning about Stravinsky's 3 Pieces for Quartet in *The New Music*, that "If this type of passage has any proper place in the art of the string quartet, then the end is near". (4)

EX Stravinsky: 3 Pieces for Quartet (i)

2 Schoenberg, A 'Brahms The Progressive', in ed Stein E Arnold Schoenberg: Style and Idea, Faber 1975, p.439

3 Schoenberg, A 'How One Becomes Lonely', *ibid.* p.30

4 Dyson, George *The New Music*, 1924 cited in White, Eric W *Stravinsky Ucal* 1966 p.233

The sense of expectation ripe for the affronting is now blunted, since the widespread 'individuation' of the avant-garde - or, rather, such expectation survives only in the parallel stream of popular music, with its commercial delineation of permitted territory. By contrast, having heard an orchestral work by X last week offers no guaranteed context for what you will hear by Y next week, as it might have for quartets by Haydn and Mozart.

It is this individuation - this loss of framework and consequent acceptance that every 'classical' work is a clean and potentially inscrutable slate - that is the legacy of modernism, and it assumes that we have to be, and can be, 'educated into' music. The work of art has become a restricted area, whose entry is controlled by its own PIN number.

Such individuation is an extreme condition, yet the idea that languages of music must be learned is not so much recent as recently pressing, because of global availability: we have always been 'educated into' our local musics - hence our frameworks of expectation - but now we have numerous ethnic musics from different social backgrounds to cope with, as well as individuated Western art music works that keep us guessing. Before the age of cultural tourism, music was clearly tied down to specific social and geographical contexts, removing the need for initiation to other languages: Western music was just that - Western - and it is hard to imagine even Irish traditional music, let alone Indian rags or the Yoik of the Sami people, being much heard in 18th-century England, unless in the popular ersatz forms of the parlour arrangement or in the brief flurry of arrangements of 'Hindustannie Airs'. An interesting exception, a piece of real 'acculturation', lies with the powerful impact of Italian violinist-composers in 18th-century Dublin on harpers like Turlough O'Carolan.

The theatre of music became forever an international one with the great cultural diaspora that projected African musics into the language of Jazz and modern popular idioms. Yet even as late as 1918, Stravinsky had to glean his first experience of Ragtime from sheet music versions, rather than recordings, just as Milhaud had to be in South America to assimilate Latin styles: musical languages were, even then, still local.

So there is a market for all the information we can get, and a discerning set of customers. What should we tell them?

Every imponderable in this lecture series flows from the music itself: the shifts in audience, in expectation, in information needed all depend on evolving musical styles. So it may not be surprising that it has taken composers and their critical support some time even to wake up to the demands of the information age. I should say at once that this is also because such provision comes at the wrong end of the process: it is a mere sticking-plaster compared with the real listening-expertise that comes from lifelong exposure to any musical genre - 'speaking the language'. The individuation that complicates the modern classical genre intensifies the need for 'life-long learning' - but who raises their children on Britten, let alone on Elliott Carter? So instant information offers merely last-minute contexts. It is like trying constantly to explain Russian jokes to an audience that never got around to learning Russian.

I said 'individuation' complicates modern art music for the new listener. I do not think, as Adorno seems to have, that it makes the avant-garde hopelessly inaccessible to all but initiates, but it makes the challenge acute. The problem facing new listeners is not that they are not familiar with classical repertoire, but that they are - maybe all the 'affirmation' of well-loved works is still, after all, able to be affronted by the unfamiliar. Adorno attacked the familiar cry that 'I do not understand this music' as "anger masquerading as expertise". Meanwhile electro-acoustic composer Robert Normandeau has spoken of having little hope of the conventional concert-hall crowd turning to his genre, finding instead that the club scene may be more receptive to the mysteries of a new genre - with their key attribute lack of expectation.

That introductory processes are a substitute in a society uneducated in hearing new music does not make them worthless -they are all we have in the world as it is. Let us look briefly at different strategies.

I identified lack of lifelong experience as the crux: for 100 years we have grown up isolated from the art music of our day. Any serious initiative must invest at least one generation ahead, which makes it highly daunting - cosmetic measures tempt with more immediate fruit, though it may wither. It follows that I see the most exciting development in the field as the pioneering of new music activity for children. These involve various age-groups in reception, performance and creativity itself, built around a professional event such as a commissioned work and/or concert - and this country leads the world in this field. Without a real overall re-evaluation in state school music - and that is sadly unlikely - this is the only approach that offers long-term hope. It has been pioneered among others by my distinguished Gresham predecessor Peter Renshaw, and I shall only offer one thought about it here:

It is natural in our visual age to initiate such projects through the most colourful aspects of a subject - say evocation of an exotic atmosphere, or responding to a picture. Yet I see the greatest benefit in these projects as introducing youngsters to musical materials themselves, and their manipulation. I think the best projects at least include a modicum of 'abstract' musical organisation - discussing a sound, or when to repeat what. We have such a low opinion of our children's concentration spans that our instincts are to sugar the pill with sensation, in particular visual sensation. Yet my experience has been that to children, sound is its own master; while I was talking to a group of 7-year olds in a Hackney school, their main aim was to capture a simple chime bar from off my knee, for my words held no interest beside the thrill of a single, ringing tone they made themselves. Schoenberg's words, that "Hard labour is, to a trained mind, no torture, but rather a pleasure" (2) are highly unfashionable, but an unfashionable truth is still a truth: music rests upon hard work, and sound is in no sense incomplete as a medium! I feel that the most durable seeds of music education are sewn where music is taken to be itself, a complete entity, rather than part of something else.

No activity is more engaged, of course, than performance itself; recent years have seen wonderful ideas coming to fruition in the performance by young people of a new repertoire written for them. Chamber Music 2000 is just one of several initiatives that are now commissioning composers like me to write works in our personal idiom but using simple materials, for young performers. As a result, under-18 chamber music groups are performing today's composers across England! (5)

Such youthful activity around art music today has its adult counterpart: the last decade has witnessed the runaway success of COMA, the organisation that commissions composers to write works playable by ensembles of non-expert performers of any age. Having conducted a new work by a colleague with such a group, I can attest to the thrilling dimension this offers in the hands a skilled composer: exotic textures of great complexity can be created by simple improvisatory fragments that require no personal virtuosity (6). Both these initiatives have shown that nothing works better to remove barriers to listening than performance itself; both initiatives have also had the merit of dismantling the edifice of specialisation around new music, a genre which has become so sadly entangled with a rarified virtuosity.

5 see www.chambermusic2000.com (site running from 13/02/01) for more details

6 see www.coma.org for more details

In reality, even these joyful community activities are beyond the reach of most potential listeners - our busy lives have little room for study of an instrument, never mind finding a new music project in which to play it. We are full of good intentions about going to the CD library and listening to something before the concert, but such intentions fall by the wayside. There we are at the concert, harassed, unprepared and possibly hostile to unfamiliar musical sounds. What can the profession do to pull us round? This brings me to the ultimate sticking-plaster, the pre-concert talk.

The notion of introducing art music to those about to hear it may seem straightforward, but there are right and wrong ways of doing it. Before considering the content of such a talk, we should consider who gives it, where they give it, when they give it and for how long. Failure in any one of these dimensions can turn the source of help into a negative force that leaves the work itself even more isolated.

The composer is the obvious person to address the audience, and the audience seems reassured by personal contact. Yet not all composers are keen on public speaking; some cannot project their voice, while others believe the music should not need any assistance. Words from the performer are always welcomed, for two reasons: firstly the mystery surrounding the un-speaking interpreter is still largely un-violated, so the spoken views of a performer have some novelty; secondly, the audience perceives (mostly correctly) that the performer supports the work, has had some choice in presenting it and thus 'carries a torch' for it. Therefore the performer's advocacy is a powerful tool. However, many performers wish to avoid the additional 'performance' of a public speech when they are collecting themselves to play; furthermore, some performers simply lack the equipment for public speaking. At its best, though, this is a powerful tool. I have a recording of a Prom concert in which conductor Markus Stenz gave a verbal guide to *Photoptosis* by Zimmerman, a 'difficult' modern score; Stenz's talk was a model of its kind.

The talk does not need to be in the concert hall, but its location is allied to its timing in playing a part in its impact. A talk away from the actual hall is likely to fragment the audience, and therefore reach fewer people. Yet more important is the timing: a talk that precedes the entire event will draw only a minority of listeners whose arrangements allow them to be present at 6.45pm. More seriously than merely reducing numbers, moreover, such a talk will attract the committed or converted listeners; the un-engaged or hostile listener will mostly stay away from a separate event, and this is the constituency most likely to benefit from composer-contact. I therefore favour an address that immediately precedes the performance, carrying maximum impact and reaching the full listenership. This has the additional advantage of making it available to the performers. The duration of such a talk will of course be shorter than a separate event, but an audience will listen to an interesting introduction for seven minutes without flinching. My most recent pre-concert talk was given for 40' to a mere eight people before the concert; the previous evening I had spoken for 5' to an entire audience of over 100 listeners. I am certain that the latter was a better use of my time. The palpable curiosity of audience members about meeting composers in person shows that they have not 'given up on' the music of their time, whatever their frustrations.

The final question to tackle is the content of such an introduction. Here the pressures of marketing, for whom new music is still the most abrasive possible challenge, have performed an insidious role in recent years, one so stealthy as to be hard to quantify. The fact is that many recent works from UK and American composers come into the public domain laden with programmatic associations, and these are naturally seized upon by broadcasters and journalists eager for a 'handle' upon which to rest a discussion. The composers are absolutely sincere in sharing these background stimuli - I am one of the most persistent - but I have become distressed by the way this plethora of non-musical reference has become the stuff of listener introduction. Audiences faced with the individuation discussed above - the lack of lingua franca - are hungry for the hidden 'back entrance' to the work of art, and will seize upon colourful references to Mayan cave-paintings, suicidal Swiss artists or (in my

case) the shamans of the itinerant Sami people. Yet we should distinguish between interest and information: I believe these background stories are more interesting than informative, for their associative relation will do nothing to guide a listener through a piece, save in the presence of the crudest programme music ('the timpani represents the marching of the armies' etc).

I believe that external associations should precede the real musical guidance - as the vicar's humorous anecdote precedes the sermon's theological discussion, as it were; it is not the sermon itself. What is needed is old-fashioned, possibly unfashionable, sign-posting on the main events in a piece - obvious sections, contrasts, soli and the like. Extra-musical background may tell you what a work is like, but not what it does, and as music inhabits 'real' time, it is only initially helpful to know what it is like (if indeed we do learn such a thing from outside sources). To contemplate Breughel's *The Triumph of Time* before hearing Birtwistle's masterpiece of that name will explain the music's slow tread, but it may not steer us through its musical landscape. If we listen out for the *cor anglais* solo and occasional wailing saxophone refrain, though, we will actually make our way.

EX Birtwistle: *The Triumph of Time*

Yet who wants to talk of *cor anglais soli* when the entire panoply of human endeavour is being swept away, as Time makes fools of us all? The temptation is to gush about the source, not the artefact. The broadcasters are among the worst offenders: I have heard pieces we revere as the most abstract in our world - from Bach's 48 Preludes and Fugues - introduced by a continuity announcer in terms of their 'dark' mood, the inevitable result of being in a 'tragic' minor key, never mind that this is something hard to avoid in a work exploring all the major and minor keys!

On the other hand, I remember Birtwistle himself being asked in an interview how a work gets started; nonplussed for a moment, he offered a phrase that I gratefully call down in many teaching situations with composers: "Well, there's something called the idea". It seems to me no shame whatever to point out the idea. Messiaen clearly felt the materials of his *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* were the visions of eternity offered in the Book of Revelation: of movement VII he writes "These swords of fire, these flows of blue orange lava, these sudden stars; this is the tumult of rainbows!" (7)

Yet more helpful to the new listener is the relationship of two musical states in this piece, one lyrical and one restless, confrontational even - something he himself also points out; for the music's origins or meaning do not tell us what it does.

EX Messiaen: *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* (vii)

In the late 1990s, when writing a large work for the BBC Proms, I was concerned enough about the growing imagery surrounding new Proms works to make a conscious move against this: my work refused all such associations, and turned out to be 'about' its own internal contrasts. As the story was inside, I called it *Inside Story* - yet one critic, who had in the past chastised me for burdensome programmatic associations, had the cheek to write to the effect that 'there's a story hidden inside, to be uncovered'!

Some people are never satisfied. I do believe, however, that purely musical information is the most satisfying long-term gift to a new listener.

7 Messiaen, Olivier Preface to *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* Paris, Durand 1942