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## **Response to Eric Clarke's Provocation**

### **"Aesthetics, Music, Perception and Complexity"**

Material and Symbolic Complexity in Music Composition-

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Complexity, to a classical performer or composer usually has a very specific meaning, bound up with the density and predictability of musical material. A strand of contemporary composition (that of James Dillon, Brian Ferneyhough and others, has been termed "New Complexity"). Despite the many problems that exist with information theory as applied to music, as a composer I find it a useful concept in thinking about how the (or an) audience might respond to what I'm doing with musical material – mainly by varying the rate at which "new stuff" is introduced. As Eric Clarke puts it: "Complexity is a relational attribute that is a function of perceivers' sensitivities/competences in relation to environmental information". When I imagine an audience response, I'm also imagining their musical competency. We can't know exactly how the music will be understood, and most composers understand that fully understanding their audience's likely response is an impossibility. By contrast, the omniscience of Bach's divine listener seems to be being echoed in Prof Clarke's Casaubon-like ambition: "What is needed is a systematic investigation of the stimulus properties that directly inform musical behaviours...". Such a comprehensive investigation does not exist (some may say could not), and in its absence, composers must just take a punt at it, adjusting the level of complexity of musical material according to their gut instinct for what will be swallowed by their audience. Of course, we are also our own audience, and the ecological approach allows us to see this reciprocal relationship in action.

Unfortunately, complexity has also been used at various times as a proxy for quality, with structural analysis of complexity being conflated with value judgement. It is probably harder to write a hit single than a new complexity style string quartet, if we are to judge from the likelihood of the two compositions achieving their musical goal, since simply to exist in performance is the goal of the latter, but the achievement of hit status requires the participation of the marketplace and of an audience of consumers. Yet the latter generates in Bourdieu's terms enormous cultural capital, whereas the former only generates economic capital, and in the UK HE sector terms, the composer of the hit song would not be likely to have her work taken very seriously as research.

If, as Prof. Clarke says, the meaning of anything is enacted by my actions in relation to it, how meaningful to the practising composer is the theoretical framework proposed? Is it useful for composers to think of what they do in ecological terms? And what are the consequences for the idea of individual expression of thinking of music in this way? I'd like to consider these questions in relation to a compositional act in which I am engaged while also writing this response.

Firstly let us candidly admit that classical music has an audience problem: across the Western world, rates of audience participation in classical music are dropping. Contemporary classical music deriving from a modernist aesthetic tends towards complexity of material, driven there by modernism's valuing of individual expression, originality and in Adornian terms, *resistance* to commercial pressures. Modernism was from the start characterised by anxiety in many ways, but Bartók's oft-quoted question to Nielsen "Is my music modern enough?" can be taken as an example of the fear of negative judgement that drives many composers towards the complex and away from the more obviously communicative. Moreover, the more complex the musical material, the more time it takes to rehearse, and therefore, roughly speaking the music's capacity to generate a sufficient audience to pay the musicians a reasonable amount for their time is in inverse proportion to its complexity. Viewed as an eco-system, then, contemporary classical music's relationship to other musical subcultures is a parasitic one.

The urgency of the audience problem in classical music is beginning to be addressed through ensembles such as the Manchester Collective, or series such as the BBC Philharmonic's Red Brick Sessions at the University of Salford; and these attempts to address the problem of audiences for classical music and new music often involve a kind of re-contextualising of the music being performed, as well as a deliberate lowering of the status of the composer in advertising literature and so on. This *de facto* rejection of music's supposed autonomous status and the authority of the composer is being done for pragmatic reasons: presenting music without comment or explanation in the expectation that an audience will appear (who? From where?) to genuflect at the shrine of the great composer doesn't work any more. So encouraging composers to think in more ecological terms about what they do seems likely to improve the environment for classical music over the long term, since it might free them to think about what they do as a means of communication.

As an example, I would like to discuss a string quartet I am currently engaged in writing; it was commissioned by the Hungarian Unitarian church as part of their celebration for the 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Edict of Torda, the first proclamation of religious toleration. The original idea of the commission was for a choral cantata, but when the choir dropped out, a string quartet was proposed instead for purely pragmatic reasons. However, the string quartet has long been associated with the idea of music's autonomy, and the commissioning of a new piece of "occasional music" (i.e. music whose purpose is to commemorate something for a group of people) runs entirely counter to the string quartet's assumed autonomous status. From Beethoven's late quartets to Shostakovich's cycle of 15 quartets, the medium has been associated with many composers' most intimate and personal musical expressions. It is also used to demonstrate technical knowledge – a kind of *ars technica* as well as *ars poetica*: Kurtág, for example, pointedly called his quartet written in 1958-9 his "Opus 1" reflecting his rejection of the Kodály influence then dominating Hungarian composition in favour of more contemporary extended techniques. So on the one hand there is an anxiety caused by the expectation to 'declare oneself' as an individual artist both technically and aesthetically: can the string quartet I am about to write sound sufficiently original, personal, and technically accomplished for it to bear the name of string quartet? And on the other hand, the quartet will have to operate within certain constraints: the ensemble available are not particularly experienced in contemporary classical music, and will not have much time to rehearse; the audience will be theologians and ministers of religion for the most part, and have little experience of contemporary classical music. This

generates a different anxiety – will the audience respond to the piece? Will the quartet do a good job in playing it?

Thinking about music in ecological terms, then, has a number of useful consequences which alleviates this tension between the expectation of the string quartet to be an autonomous and timeless statement of musical expression; and the need to write a piece which works for this audience, on this occasion. Viewed as ecological 'niche', then, the string quartet will have to respond to a number of different conditions. The ecological perspective allows the piece to be seen as a balancing of these various affordances, stripped of the value judgements and consequent anxieties derived from modernism ("is my music modern enough?").

As an example of the way that this viewpoint allows a re-evaluation of the conditions of the creation of music, let's look for a minute of the idea of the musical programme. Classical music has always had recourse to symbolism and narrative in attempting to appeal to audiences: for example, Liszt's response to 'the growing gap between artist and public' was the creation of the Symphonic Poem. We train our composers, though, not to explain their music according to some authorial explanatory code; at undergraduate level, a musical piece accompanied by the inevitable commentary which consisted of a simple narrative would not get a good mark, regardless of how accomplished the music was when viewed as autonomous. Prof Clarke's example of Beethoven's 9<sup>th</sup> 'affording' a broad range of interpretations but excluding others might allow us to return to a kind of narrative symbolism that communicates well with non-specialist audiences without sacrificing music's transcendent ability to symbolize many different things simultaneously.

In the quartet I use a complex web of musical symbol and reference relevant to the occasion. Methods include direct quotation (for example, a passage from a piece by John Ireland, who, I recently discovered, attended the same Unitarian chapel as a boy that I did growing up); encoding of names (following the practice of 16<sup>th</sup> century counterpoint, the names of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century Religious reformer Dávid Ferenc/Franz Hertel as D-A-D F-E-E-C and F-A-E flat B (H in German); a hymn tune, derived from these notes, but set in a Bach-era 4 part harmony; a secondary 12-note theme based around the augmented triad, and referring to Liszt's 12-note experimentations, and by extension to the Faust myth, because Liszt used a theme made up of 4 augmented triads in his Faust symphony; Liszt is referred to because he performed several times in Kolozsvár (now Cluj, Romania, the location of the quartet's premiere), and his likeness was used in a famous painting by Aladár Körösfői-Kriesch of the debate at Gyulafehérvár in 1568 which led to the proclamation of the edict of Torda as the face of Dávid Ferenc; pentatonic material related to all the main themes meant to represent a dream recounted by the Hungarian Unitarian minister Balázs Ferenc in his 1929 book *Bejárom a Kerék Világot* (I travel the round world) following his hearing music on the Gu Zhang zither in China in 1928, and which I also heard in China in 2016. Throughout there is a strong Bartókian flavour, particularly in the multiple polyphonic lines and long-short "Bulgarian" rhythms.

I describe this complexity of reference, not with the intention to bewilder a non-Transylvanian Hungarian Unitarian audience – which is the ecological niche which this piece will inhabit - but to describe a type of complexity which is not necessarily a function of the music's surface. The piece doesn't need to be understood as a web of symbols, and could be

interpreted in many other ways – but the piece is intended work simply understood as one alternating between moods of contemplation, and dynamic polyphony.

Finally, to return to Prof. Clarke's afterword in which he states that music psychology as a discipline tends to deal with general principles than specific manifestations. Musicology is the opposite, and of course in a sense composition as an individual endeavour is even more extreme. Somehow as an individual composer writing a piece we must believe in the uniqueness of the piece's expressive form, although we know for it to have meaning for an audience it must also have 'partial commonality' with other pieces. Thinking about musical or artistic scenes (such as New York in the 1960's, Paris in the 1920's) as an ecological niche allows us to understand this apparent contradiction, in the same way that an ant, if it could cognate such things, would probably believe that it was acting with complete individual freedom when it carries a leaf along a trail of pheromones, yet its behaviour contributes to an *emergent* collaborative effect (the ant hill). Classical music urgently needs to embrace the collective scene, as the result of emergent behaviour, rather than the atomizing effect of the belief in the unique expression of the individual, and the ecological metaphor proposed by Eric Clarke can give us the intellectual framework to do so.