

'Crisis' in Contemporary Music? What Crisis?

THE HEART OF THE MATTER

By
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Is contemporary music in a state of crisis? Answers range from 'certainly' to 'possibly' to 'not at all'. I would like to contribute some points to this continuing debate which, if not altogether original, are ones which I think do not receive the attention they merit.

Colleagues, I believe the fundamental debate is not about style or language, and that the solution is not about marketing or education. Maybe we all need to invest time and energy examining the traditional reasons why artists have always tried to express themselves, be it by music or any other art form. It may well be that contemporary music 'is in crisis' but maybe the real issue and solution is not just about educating the listener or consumer, but, to ask 'who is to blame?' Have we lost sight of the reason why we are composers?

Music publishers have invested a substantial financial amount in contemporary composers, which is an admirable commitment to the future of 'classical' or 'art' music. To publish and market a new composer, or indeed a new piece, requires not only a lot of financial nerve but also a high level of artistic and cultural bravery. Music publishers work in a unique environment. They run a business, have to balance the books, and all investment has to be justified. Also traditionally a country's cultural heritage was entrusted to their ability to develop and nurture the best of new composing talent. Not only do they have to be able to recognise a new and exciting voice, but they also have to try and predict future stylistic developments and to 'publish for the future' not just for 'the now'. Get it right - and the country can draw on a vast reservoir of creative talent. But get it wrong - and we become a rubbish dump for mediocrity and the inane. Into this arena, fraught with pitfalls and potential for mistakes, I believe, publishers have always tried to bring a certain amount of expertise and honour - protecting their artists from the financial complexities of modern society, ensuring universal copyright is registered and investing time and money into the partnership. All right: they are running a business for profit - but composers must appreciate that it can a very risky business indeed.

But are publishers getting it right? At no other time in the history of art music has the consumer been more educated, more knowledgeable and had such easy access to a wide range of musical styles and genre. From teenager to granny they all have experience of dramatic orchestral tapestries through the medium of films and television. Given the popularity of the film *Lord of the Rings*, for instance, you have to acknowledge that a whole new generation has been exposed to an experience of the drama and excitement generated by a large orchestral canvas, the very building blocks of classical or art music.

I believe the general public has taste and more importantly, 'instinct' and can recognise great classical music regardless of the style or uniqueness of the voice - providing, that is, the composer has talent, is skilled and wants to communicate. That does not necessarily mean writing in a traditional style and not developing your own voice, but rather holding fast to those elements that reward the listener and performers. In my view, however, publishers have often promoted composers who lack these essential ingredients and, most importantly, the indispensable ingredient of 'heart'.

Performers and audiences, I believe, should be rewarded by those emotional elements in music, which make us all 'more than we are'. Recently I was in the foyer of my local music college when a young man approached and showed me a score. He was at great pains to point out that he had studied orchestration for years and that 'that in it was a great skill'. But orchestration is not about what is learnt, but what is needed. The arrogance and sheer blindness of his approach distressed me. Too many of our young musicians think that composing comes from learning rather than, as I believe, directly from the heart. I did not disillusion the young man but left him to the mercies of academia, to which, I am sorry to say, publishers also too readily succumb. Even in merely financial terms, for publishers to ignore the educated judgment of today's consumers is surely foolish.

There is a whole industry of academic pretentiousness that has been nurtured and cultivated by the contemporary music establishment which is, in my opinion, a million miles away from the motivation and philosophy of composers from past generations. Having cultivated the weed you have little choice but to try and justify its existence. Why? Is it not better to cut your losses and acknowledge that music, as all art forms, has to communicate if it is to reward? There is a vast worldwide market for good classical or art music if it communicates - that is, has drama, energy. Some of the diet that has been served in the last forty years does nothing but alienate a consumer who instinctively knows the quality of the real product, regardless of the style. How often has music that is questionable been commissioned and consequently published, and what turns out to be its one performance defended on the grounds that 'the language, and style are so new that it is bound to be difficult for audiences to appreciate'. That statement may have been true for Beethoven's day but not for today's highly educated audiences with their access to a vast information highway.

I was once shown a score by a leading contemporary composer and the lecturer who was praising the work pointed out its great beauty of line and phrasing - and that the written score 'alone was a work of art.' I happen to be a tuba player and pointed out that the orchestration was such that no matter how much counterpoint and beauty of line existed on paper, to write for tuba in its topmost register as the composer had done meant that all the listener would hear was that instrument's rather tiresome honking quality. This remark was met by great derision and incredulity that I should question the composer's 'genius'. (For me the genius would have been the player who could have played such high notes *molto pianissimo* in order that the other woodwind instruments might be heard.)

Of course composers have to stretch and challenge both performers and an audience. Nobody writes harder music than I (ask any of the ensembles that have commissioned works from me), but music is much more than a technical exercise. You cannot learn to be a composer! Composing is a talent that you develop, an instinct you follow, in fact a matter of the heart the very ingredient which provokes the 'special response' from performers and their audience. Years ago I suffered a lot of jealousy and criticism from so-called more experienced musicians, who just did not know the meaning of the word 'instinct'. Consequently their music lacked heart: it might be interesting and have fascinating textual colour, but if it lacks a soul what justifies its existence? Or am I missing something here and does a higher spectrum of a musical stratosphere exist somewhere that is apparent only to those individuals who appreciate the most extreme 'Avant Garde' If so please tell me: I am willing to study and learn if you can convince me of the validity of your secret!

How can you align a contemporary piece of art music (that may repeat a similar phrase over and over again, or a vast ever changing sound world where dissonance is piled on dissonance with no perceptible, and I underline the word perceptible, logic to the gradient), with the dramatic vivid orchestral colours of a film score? True - to anticipate a reply - 'one is absolute music and the other is wallpaper' (pretty sophisticated wallpaper, too, I might add!). The tragedy is that, in today's climate, the essence of heart and soul, traditionally found in all music is now, in the wallpaper, not the absolute, and worse - the consumer knows it. I accept that a lot of good contemporary music has been written and published in the last few years. The media and general public however tend only to remember the disasters.

The good pieces may be played more than once and even enter the repertoire, but the bad pieces merely reinforce the impression that art music has lost touch with its source and is now part of the self-indulgent world of the elitist musical establishment. Please note - before you form a lynch party - that this is not necessarily my opinion, but what I believe is a public perception, rightly or wrongly, provoked by the music of contemporary composers in the last forty years.

No one has more respect for the BBC than I. It has, for years, fought a rearguard action to maintain standards, trying always to support what it believes is music of the highest calibre. Radio Three, traditionally, has supported, broadcast and commissioned the best new pieces especially from young talent. Many established English composers, past and present, owe their success to the patronage and support of the BBC. Working under, sometimes impossible financial constraints it has tried to bring to the public attention music that it considered to be of the highest visionary and artistic worth. However there lies the rub. It is what it perceives to be worthy and contributing to an ever-evolving musical stylistic language. Get it right - and English music maintains its place on the world's cultural stage Get it wrong - and a cultural desert will emerge. The responsibility is immense and one that must surely weigh heavily on its management's shoulders.

To be fair the BBC has had considerable experience and a proven track record but in today's musical environment there are many more factors and unknown social variables. I believe that they do need to keep in touch with public taste and interest and not always consider it can dictate the evolution of the language of music. By the nature of both reputation and cultural heritage, it has to walk a tightrope of academic and artistic validity. Sometimes I feel in the last forty years it has stumbled, and as we all know it is the stumble that provokes the gasp that the crowd remember.

The Proms festival is a tremendous celebration of the BBC's efforts on behalf of classical music and English composers. I for one appreciate and stand in awe at its courage, though sometimes I also worry that a number of the pieces, commissioned and performed, are only remembered because of their provocative and controversial sound world and not for any artistic or emotional merit. I sincerely hope my worry springs from naivete and that on this occasion my assessment and instincts are wrong.

Despite all the criticism Classic FM has done much to generate and raise public perception of classical or art music. It is true that it does not play vast amounts of the more avant garde contemporary music, though I do understand that as much as 40% of its output is devoted to music by living composers. Classic FM has also been accused of reducing the listeners' attention span by concentrating on something akin to a menu of musical snacks, that is, of cheapening the product by presenting it in an abridged format. The fact that this approach is more in keeping with the marketing philosophies of today's society seems to be of little consequence to the critics, who question how a person can perceive or value the artistic merit of absolute music if you just broadcast a fragment of its totality. Maybe, having spent years researching and evaluating the potential product, the academics, from their perspective, have a point.

It would be much more rewarding and aesthetically pleasing to listen to a complete string quartet, than just one movement. However we live in a consumer environment and to market a product, no matter what its artistic stature, you have to employ the elements that are psychologically common to that society. Musical snippets, for instance, feature prominently in today's advertising campaigns. Consumers may not realise they are hearing classical music, or know the composer, or be able to name the piece, but are we entitled to criticize Classic FM for employing the same principles in their broadcasts?

I personally believe they have simulated and encourage a tremendous potential for our product as contemporary composers, much more than we could have ever dreamed possible. I am reminded of a certain football club, which plays Prokofiev's music just before the beginning of the game. When a London ballet company visited the town's main theatre to perform Prokofiev's Romeo and Juliet it was amazed to find the venue had been sold out three months in advance.

I do not know the percentage of football supporters in the audience but the previous visit, the year before, had not been very well supported. Coincidence or not? It would be interesting to find out; and, by the way, one of the club's best selling CDs is apparently a recording of that very piece.

I personally believe that Classic FM has made a tremendous contribution to the public acceptance and understanding of classical music with its intellectual and emotional demands. If I have a criticism it may be that sometimes they seem to allow airtime choice to be dictated by the marketing requirements of their advertisers, but hell! they have to live, and you cannot have everything.

Which brings me to the record companies. I suppose an apt description of the individuals that run 'the majors' as they are known, would be 'tough cookies with hearts and pockets of gold'. I do believe they live on different planets from those of composers or indeed artists. However in their defence they have to operate in an environment where judgment and instinct are paramount. Like music publishers they have to anticipate public taste and demand. Get it right and the financial rewards are reasonable - and I stress the word reasonable. Get it wrong and the financial pressures from their masters are colossal.

Most A&R people I have had dealings with have been very genuine and committed musicians. They constantly have to pick their way through a diplomatic minefield, dealing with composers and performers who may have very fragile egos and who may have very little understanding of the commercial world. With the best will in the world you cannot justify investing thousands of pounds in a product if your instinct tells you there is going to be a limited return, no matter how much you believe in the composer.

I remember the head of marketing of a major record company kept the recording I had sent him of my first symphony. He had kept it, said his secretary 'because he liked it so much'; unfortunately he and his team did not consider it to be of significant commercial value to market. Not much consolation for the poor composer who had invested so much time and effort in the project.

The record companies, like most of the music publishers, are at the moment under siege. The only way they can compete against the thousands of composer-publishers and small record labels are to invest a considerable amount in marketing and tap into their network of worldwide sales, distribution and returns. However they run the risk of becoming victims of pirating and copyright infringement, with their product posted on the web for any individual, i.e. thief, to download free of charge. The more successful they are, with the marketing of a product, the greater the danger of piracy. Is it any wonder, considering the risks involved, that most are reluctant to gamble on a new composer or more importantly a new musical style or language.

I personally have a lot of sympathy for their position. True, they may have their successes but I also bet there is a lot of gnashing of teeth over the many failures we do not hear about. I may have lost money over the recording of my first symphony, but it was my work and I believe in its artistic merit. This amount in any case would be a fraction of the cost a major record company would budget and risk on a new composer or piece. I hope, at the very least, that artists will always try to be fair and see both sides of the coin.

However I also believe the record companies have to accept some blame, and are to a certain extent responsible for their own predicament with regard to classical music. There is a limit to the amount of return, no matter how popular a Mozart symphony may be, if the product market is shared with countless other recordings on of the same music. This practice of over-recording has saturated the market and restricted the investment in new blood and new products. Any manufacturer will tell you this is a recipe for disaster. You have to continue to develop and improve your product if you hope to maintain consumer interest. To be fair having witness public and media reaction to contemporary music over the last 40yrs and the extremes of stylistic language used can we blame the reluctance of what are essentially business ventures to invest in a product that has such adverse public and hence consumer perception and reaction. (Even the most optimistic of composers would have to admit there would be a limited financial return and demand for a recording of a certain piano piece by John Cage)

Mention of John Cage brings me finally to my fellow contemporary composers. One of the great privileges of my life was to spend so time on the board of The British Academy of Composers and Songwriters. I will just never cease to be amazed at - and hopefully never forget - just how much time, energy and generosity of spirit my fellow composers, both popular and classical, gave in defence of the music of their member composers and musicians. These individuals who work so hard for the rights of artists and composers regardless of the cost or drain on their own creative resources and energy cannot be praised enough.

What is it that makes them work so hard and so long to defend and promote the worth of British Music and composers? Certainly no financial gain, as I know all gave of their time freely, and in some cases, this unselfish commitment went on for years. I believe it is nothing more than a belief in the rightness of what they do as composers a generosity of spirit that fuels a desire to help and support the value of British music and creative endeavour regardless of its genre.

I never witnessed one moment of envy or jealousy from these talented individuals - just a wholehearted commitment to the work of their fellow writers. Therein lies the hope! If all writers and composers have such integrity then the journey to producing art and music that has worth will be revitalised. I do not pen the words 'Brotherhood of composers' lightly. I believe passionately in the integrity of my fellow musicians and artists.

The world needs our vision more than ever. The real music and art will survive and be triumphant, because it contains those elements that are at the core of the human spirit.

A crisis in contemporary music? Audiences and performers will always eventually recognise integrity and the beauty found in music that reflects the soul of its creator. No government, agency, tyrant, social ignorance, greed, prejudice, corruption, analysis or scientific theory can stand against that universal truth. You may say that artists, writers and composers are mere dreamers; but it is this belief in the higher ideal that touches all, to replenish and revitalise society. To each his own, all to have their place, each to contribute, in his or her own unique way, to the elements that make us 'more than we are'.

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