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Worlds of Contemporary Music

Perspectives for composition in 2024

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Abstract

The awakening of the musical world from the Covid-19 pandemic has brought to life issues within our musical communities that are no longer deferrable, particularly from the composers' perspective. The culturally niche status of contemporary western art music has remained largely unchallenged. However, the complications that arose during the Covid-19 lockdowns, concerning financial and physical limitations, irrevocably highlighted the difficulties this art-form faces in responding to the advent of modernity. The times of inactivity propelled by the general emergency have provided many of us with a change in perspective, an opportunity to inquire on the way that our world shapes the listening experience and holds contact with the public. In order to allow artists to envision a future, we must address questions such as: "*What music should the contemporary artist write?*" and "*How can we sustainably involve the general public?*". In an attempt to find an answer for the author himself, a broad look at recent trends in the field has been undertaken, revealing conflicting, paradoxical outcomes and establishing a dual necessity: Adopting a post-genre way to look at new music that can simultaneously hold such contradictory outcomes and renewing the means through which our art communicates with an audience.

Key words

contemporary music, composition, community, audience, listening experience, musical work.

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I. Foreword

“There must be something else” (Berio, 1968)

The first time I encountered *Sinfonia* by Luciano Berio, I could neither understand nor imagine the role it would play in my musical development. Years later, as a young adult and at the start of the Covid-19 lockdown season of the Italian pandemic, words from the third movement echoed in my brain when I saw the majority of my musical projects collapse. “Why all this?” Berio’s central motif in his search for meaning became such a relevant question to me.

At the time, I got to first-hand experience the paleness of contemporary music’s impact on the world. The pandemic revealed to me how distant this art-form had departed from the general public’s interest, need, attention. A commonly known fact in our community, but for me, something that lay as a dormant truth, unexperienced. A frail whisper covered by the tumultuous pace of my busy life turned suddenly into hearable sound, an unavoidable tinnitus. I felt as if I were operating from the other side of a chasm. This realization brought to the surface inevitable questions, most of which can be summarized by a short and probing one: Why even compose such music today?

The beauty of Berio’s masterpiece, besides the absolute stunning craft in the score and the life’s achievement of a genius is to be found in the answer it provides to this impossibly hard question, fully woven in an intricate semantic and open sea of ambiguous quotations and references.

And when they ask, why all this, it is not easy to find an answer [...] for when we find ourselves, face to face, now, here, and they remind us that all this can't stop the wars, can't make the old younger or lower the price of bread, can't erase solitude or dull the tread outside the door, we can only nod, yes, it's true, but [...] We must believe it's true. There must be something else. (Berio, 1968)

Fifty years after the premiere of *Sinfonia*, I have been awakened to a world where this answer alone could not suffice any longer. The view of desolation offered by the pandemic had simultaneously revealed and crushed within myself the beautiful lie at the core of that piece, the resonant and optimistic “We must believe it's true” that cast an illusion and a moral obligation to write music with the utmost belief it would have an impact on the physical world. “Why all this?” The answer to that reality, this new reality, had to be found again. It is certainly a hard pursuit, one for which I do not believe to possess the full intellectual capacities. What I can do instead, and within this essay, is to critically assess our musical reality to understand

how it affects my practice and aesthetic as composer in an attempt to find an answer for myself. Because, despite any nihilistic views caused by this fall from grace of my own musical world, I still hold a will to compose, I still find sustained meaning and beauty in my practice, and as contradictory as it may seem, I still agree with Berio: “There must be something else”, and I feel an obligation to give voice to this indistinctness, to this “else”, ever more clearly.

II. An aesthetic dilemma

What is behind this factual poor response from the general public? Why does contemporary art music struggle so much to find its space within people's lives? My first reaction as an aspiring artist was to point the finger at myself. Am I deliberately contributing to this distancing? In other words, is the music that composers write today the issue at hand?

This aesthetic dilemma has been the focus of the writings of countless composers, conductors, critics, writers, and philosophers alike. Positions are as varied and divisive as they can get, and while through the years many of these intellectuals have tried to adjudicate proper style, politicians, patrons, and dictators alike have similarly tried to control compositional outputs. If music critic Alex Ross defined twentieth-century composition as "largely untamed art [...], unassimilated underground" (Ross, 2007, p. 4), the contemporary art-music world has now evolved to pure collective subconscious. To determine faults and merits of such an art-form, I believe, could be hardly called a fruitful use of someone's time. Yet, in this plethora of voices and points of view, some objective reasoning that proved to be of the utmost importance to me can be found in the studies in theory led by Lerdahl and Jackendoff, published in the book *A Generative Theory of Tonal Music* (1983), and the considerations advanced by Milton Babbitt in his 1958 article *The Composer as Specialist*, originally published with the provocative title *Who Cares if You Listen?*

Perhaps the greatest discovery of Lerdahl and Jackendoff's research, who tried to model music understanding from the perspective of cognitive science, is the following: "There's a crucial distinction between the principles by which a piece is composed and the principles by which it is heard" (Lerdahl & Jackendoff, 1983, p. 300).

What this meant in the context of their research is the relevancy to which this distinction applies when referring to compositional procedures that do not directly engage the listener's ability to organize a musical surface. The two researchers pointed out specifically the relevance of this discovery when trying to depict atonal and serial music, specifying how:

Probabilistic, aleatoric, arbitrary, and extended serialism methods fail to 'infer a rich organization' no matter how a piece has been composed or how densely packed its musical surface is. [...] It is in this sense that an apparently simple Mozart sonata is more complex than many twentieth-century pieces that at first seem highly intricate. (Lerdahl & Jackendoff, 1983, p. 300)

A reinforcement of this idea comes from composer and theorist D. Tymoczko's book *A Geometry of Music* (2011) and his focus on the five compositional features that jointly contribute to a sense of tonality and which compositionally "impose much stronger constraints than we would intuitively expect" (Tymoczko, 2011, p. 4).

Breaking free from such features is largely a matter of personal choice, as the use of contemporary techniques is not mutually exclusive with the presence of these features. In other words, composers can make a rational choice involving the limits of their craft's focus and exploration by having a clear idea of the tools that make up both listening grammar and compositional grammar. This choice, however, tells us very little about the quality and artistic value of the art that would be subsequently produced. Indeed "accessibility per se is not a measure of value" (Lerdahl & Jackendoff, 1983, p. 301).

Babbitt knew exactly what Lerdahl and Jackendoff discovered a few decades later, and to my knowledge, he was the first composer to rationally respond to the discrepancy between contemporary art music and the general public, advising for a breakage of such music from public life. In regard to the aspect of choice, Babbitt's points and reasoning proved to be of infallible accuracy: Contemporary music is an advanced subject akin to other scientific academic disciplines, and the modern composer operates with research-based choices that are meant to contribute to an expansion of our understanding of the subject. A dialogue with a broader and uninformed public is therefore unreasonable to expect. It is a retreat, indeed a conscious choice.

I dare suggest that the composer would do himself and his music an immediate and eventual service by total, resolute, and voluntary withdrawal from this public world to one of private performance and electronic media, with its very real possibility of complete elimination of the public and social aspects of musical composition. By so doing, the separation between the domains would be defined beyond any possibility of confusion of categories, and the composer would be free to pursue a private life of professional achievement, as opposed to a public life of unprofessional compromise and exhibitionism. (Babbitt, 1958, p. 126)

Yet, our musical world has never had the coherence to burn those bridges with public musical life. I would say that the commissions, the awards, the desire, and the omnipresent expectation for public recognition is an unsaid, lingering expectation that is ideologically tied to what art music used to be in the past. The fact that today our community benefits from the same halls, the same funds, and the same means of expression (expertly trained musicians above all) that

are historically linked to traditional Western art music seems to suggest that a departure from that model is simply not possible from the artist's perspective.

What has happened instead is that the general public has decided to participate less and less in what it perceived as concert-conferences, indeed reverse-engineering Babbitt's predictions and letting us free of their layman presence and hard-earned cash. It is not entirely inconceivable to consider that the cultural niche of contemporary art music in the West is now approaching the actual dimensions of its own pool of artists.

Becoming aware of this possible explanation for my feelings of a few years back, I did not really know what to think of this position. If this had to be truthful, it would then seem to me that the composer's existential condition would be approximating that of the purposefully exiled artist, constantly reminding the outer world of a possible and never achieved cultural ideal. A life of sacrifice, passion, and dedication to the art form that is sustainable only in the shape of a love that is unconditional and all-giving.

I know this from observing the lives and characters of the many talented and intelligent composers that I have crossed paths with. We all want to write art that is deeply moving, elegantly crafted, and that helps the greater community unveil mysteries of the hearing experience. And if successful in this endeavour, we want to share the product with as many people as possible, for our faith in its positive impact has never been affected by any sort of quantitative data that could prove us otherwise.

This is none but the essence of Berio's testament, and maybe, it might as well be the start of a new beginning of exploration that could foster a revival of that humane connection, from merely desired outcome to a tangible reality.

III. A Personal Language

In recent years, I have taken the opportunity to respond to the doubts and positions raised in the previous discussion through my own compositional practice. Instinctively, I have never believed that reverting to traditional techniques and practices would be an appropriate response for contemporary composers facing allegations of elitism. Nor have I considered the post-war musical phase a failure, as some of the harshest critics of new music have suggested. Instead, I have chosen to measure my compositional intentions and practices against the theoretical inputs and concerns of 'listening grammar', and I can say that both my clarity and craft have benefited greatly from this process. This chapter aims to showcase the results of that journey.

The inevitable starting point was my partially subconscious musical taste. Compositionally speaking, I know where my aesthetic preferences in music lead me. While part of the writing process is certainly aimed at developing techniques that could further guide me in that direction, I was also interested in understanding what those preferences meant and their effect on the listening experience. To achieve this, I engaged with the theoretical work expressed in Tymoczko's writings. The theme of his book *A Geometry of Music* (Tymoczko, 2011) has been to investigate how composers can combine the parameters of five features to produce interesting musical effects. These features are:

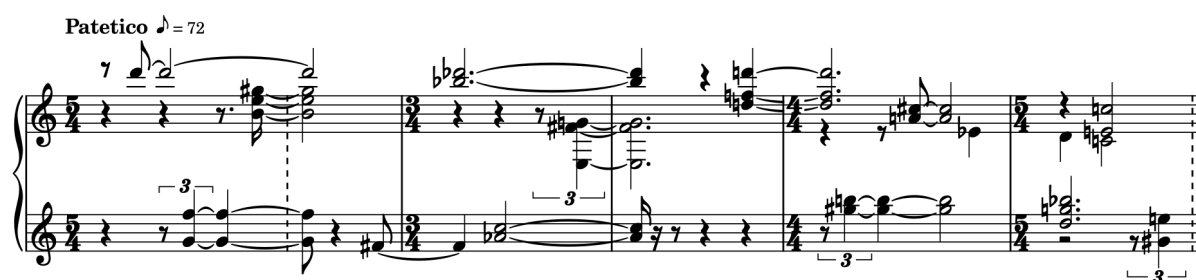
1. Conjunct melodic motion. Melodies tend to move by short distances from note to note.
2. Acoustic consonance. Consonant harmonies are preferred to dissonant harmonies, and tend to be used at points of musical stability.
3. Harmonic consistency. The harmonies in a passage of music, whatever they may be, tend to be structurally similar to one another.
4. Limited macroharmony. I use the term macro-harmony to refer to the total collection of notes heard over moderate spans of musical time. Tonal music tends to use relatively small macroharmonies, often involving five to eight notes.
5. Centricity. Over moderate spans of musical time, one note is heard as being more prominent than the others, appearing more frequently and serving as a goal of musical motion. (Tymoczko, 2011, p. 4)

By analyzing my pre-existing scores in light of these features, I was surprised to discover how unintentionally I had applied many of these constraints. I think of my music as lyrical; therefore, it is extremely important to me to have sensible movement in the parts. At the same time, my harmonic taste and hearing respond extremely well to similar intervallic structures used in both scales and pitch classes. What was lacking in my reasoning, then, was an articulate and conscious manipulation of the parameters of consonance, limited macro-harmony, and centricity. I tried to confront my musical thought and planning to include this set of limitations,

perceiving them as tools to either express or negate a musical idea. By gaining access to and understanding the integration of such limitations, I was able to rediscover sonorities and intentions that are now shaping my direction as an artist.

I was able to reconnect my taste to a fascination with the untapped emotional and cognitive potential that dream-states offer and their relationship to art and music. This fascination has been present throughout my life, a possible gift from the heritage of my father's work as a painter. The allure of dreams lies in their ability to transcend ordinary experience, reshaping reality's fabric in ways that simultaneously accommodate and challenge our perceptions. This sparked a desire to infuse music with similar qualities, allowing listeners, by analogy, to traverse new auditory landscapes that are as unpredictable and evocative as dreams themselves. The goal is to convey a physical sound world responsive to parameters such as uneven formal architectures, transmutation of pitch materials and harmonic fields through ambivalence and paradox, while retaining a cognitive response imbued with meaning due to their roots in tonal music theory.

In *Helsingborgs Natt* (2023) for Orchestra, the main pitch material was provided by non-functional triadic conjunctions within multiple interval transpositions to create connections that retain consonance and coherence, but simultaneously obscure the work's tonal centre by extending the macro-harmony to include complex chords and microtonal deviations of such chords. This is a deliberate choice towards the expression of a dream-space, where coherence is not affected by ambivalence.



Fiammetti, E. *Helsingborgs Natt* (2023). [Score] Opening Bars, Piano Reduction

Limited series of pitches are utilized as the main melodic material and superimposed within an octatonic scale built around the diminished triad—the musical backbone of triadic pitch space, as described by Messiaen (1987)—to induce a sense of ambiguity in *Från Dimman* (2022) for mixed sextet, and hence confront the parameters of uncertainty in dreams.

In *Minnets Fönster* (2024) for Piano Quartet, a manipulation within the breadth of pitch space material and the polarity between instrumental functions in the ensemble has been used in bars 108-120, the emotional climax of the piece, to address a function of dream's discontinuity. This piece also presents a window in which all five features' limitations are present but focuses on tonal ambivalence through the use of median shifts in centricity. This sophistication closely resembles a musical technique developed by my teacher Bent Sørensen, whom I also quote in this work by inserting a recurring musical four-note phrase from his work *Pantomime-Papillons* (2014). It is no secret that Sørensen's music has inspired me the most during these last few years, and for which I am filled with a sense of thankfulness that often has me pay homages to him in my own pieces: some in a more direct way, other times more subtly.

The conscious implementation of Tymozcko's five features and theoretical work has then given me the occasion to accommodate a deeper thinking within my own practice to deliver a more precise response to such compositional stimuli.

IV. New Paths Await

Having taken the time to examine the premises for a grammatical fracture between listening and composing within my own practice, I was surprised by a realization. I could not be convinced by the argument that suggests a preponderance of the traditional repertoire over newly composed music, regardless of its complexity or aesthetic decisions.

Economic factors, as a measure of public response, were never mentioned to me as salient or relevant during this survey. However, the economic model of traditional repertoire, advantaged by the fact that it consists of a roster of pieces that are generally more accessible and have proven to stand the test of time, might suggest an entirely alternative route for new music. There is something to be said about the nature of the listening experience of Western Art Music (WAM) that might reveal inherent problems: Why is this widely appreciated art form perceived as unable to sustain itself without public funding? Quite absurdly, in this context, a live performance of a Mozart sonata is not that far off from a piece by Helmut Lachenmann.

Both sides of the art-music craft, traditional and contemporary, are indeed struggling in their attempt to reach and attract new audiences, relying on an increasingly diminishing pool of highly educated aficionados who does not seem to be gaining much turnover in new generations. This is indeed a problem to solve, if not now, it will come as increasingly pressing in the future.

Music critic and writer Baricco has hypothesized about the nature of this issue, suggesting that its critical problem lies in its ties to a now-exhausted commercial idea and product of music. Baricco explains how the idea of preserving the purity of a musical work derives from the idea and the trends that arose at the times of Beethoven. That music had a moving and compelling point to make: to stand and reign sovereign in the field of morality and spirituality, above every other kind of music. This musical objective essentially appealed to the likings of the rising bourgeois class, who aimed to showcase that they, too, were able to aspire to nobleness and that their individualities were not second to those of royal blood. This is something that L. v. Beethoven himself not so tacitly tried to embody in his lifetime by attempting to change his last name to 'von Beethoven'.

According to Baricco, this newly found relationship with the musical object essentially opened a fertile period of creativity for all artists, who were encouraged to produce music that marked

this sacred identity as factual reality. This newly found spiritual desire naturally projected its aura onto the whole collection of WAM's previous repertoire, from pre-renaissance music onwards, even if such music never held such premises within its means of realisation in the first place. This mirrors the fact that most music performed in concert halls to this day is historically found in the approximate time frame between Beethoven's birth and the First World War.

That precious demand for nobleness and spirituality had a significant impact on the art world. And while it propelled generations of artists to produce masterpieces of the craft, it ceased to exist in the general public with the societal changes that happened with the advent of the First World War. A shift that a few decades later Theodore Adorno pointed out through the immortal pen of German novelist Thomas Mann, in "Doctor Faustus" (1947) in a dialogue between Adrien (the protagonist) and his best friend Serenus (the narrator):

A: Isn't it amusing that music for a long time considered herself a means of release, whereas she herself, like all the arts, needed to be redeemed from a pompous isolation, which was the fruit of the culture-emanicipation, the elevation of culture as a substitute for religion—from being alone with an elite of culture, called the public, which soon will no longer be, which even now no longer is, so that soon art will be entirely alone, alone to die, unless she were to find her way to the folk, that is, to say it unromantically, to human beings? [...]

S: I was yet in my deepest soul unsatisfied with his utterance, directly dissatisfied with him. What he had said did not fit with him, his pride, his arrogance if you like, which I loved, and to which art has a right. Art is mind, and mind does not at all need to feel itself obligated to the community, to society—it may not, in my view, for the sake of its freedom, its nobility. An art that "goes in unto" the folk, which makes her own the needs of the crowd, of the little man, of small minds, arrives at wretchedness, and to make it her duty is the worst small-mindedness, and the rriurder of mind and spirit. And it is my conviction that mind, in its most audacious, unrestrained advance and researches, can, however unsuited to the masses, be certain in some indirect way to serve man—in the long run men. (Mann)

This clash of positions eloquently exposes the nature of the debate: If the general public was able to support and allow the horrors of the Nazi regimes (Mann's novel is set precisely at the time of World War II), why should modern art be concerned at all with what the general public is able to sustain, like, or even approve?

How to believe otherwise, in the aftermath of the greatest war that men ever witnessed. Still, for the first time in more than 150 years, the commercial desire for art-music had shifted. This marked the years of Jazz, of the prohibition, the great depression and the changes in how the public experienced music, how composers wrote music, too. What to do then with that model of intents, that premiss of nobleness and spirituality that facilitated all of the best works that

we know and cherish? Should artists and composers give this up as well, perhaps compromise and alter the values of their inner research in order to be able to speak to men of their time, i.e. to find the way of the folk?

Baricco not only seems to suggest so in regard to contemporary art, and as remedy for classical WAM poor public response, He focuses on the interpretation renewal within repertoire. Let's think, for example, at Gould performances and the scandal that was perceived within the community when the famous instrumentalist performed Brahms's Piano Concerto n°1 at Carnegie Hall on April 6, 1962, in NYC, under the baton of Leonard Bernstein. For Baricco, this approach of renewal through challenging interpretations could be a way forward to keep passing relevant information and ideas through the scores of repertoire. While I think this idea is highlighting a tendency of WAM listeners to expect a performance of a given musical work to behave in a certain way, imposing a certain artistic direction on performance practice, I can't seem to think of this as the main issue. Nor a striking rejection of the many technical advancements of our times, too.

If it could be said in-fact, that WAM was really after the highest quality of a performance, one that mirrors the heights of the musical work in spirituality, why then reject the advancements of technology that could make that result happen faster and cheaper? And this might apply for the recording's standards and techniques, too. What is possible in the recording studio is after all the precise reason why world leading artist and pianist Grigory Sokolov refuses to record anything that is not performed live in the hall, and many expert musicians similarly feel mistrust and judge technological aids as ethically dubious.

To better understand this reasoning, one could absurdly fit this argument into the fictitious parallel of competitive running, such as 'If the goal is covering the distance and not running the marathon, then why not hop on a car to finish the race faster?' Indeed, this feels very much like an ethical violation for the world of athletics, which might reveal for the purpose of this paper, that the goal for WAM has never really been about covering the distance in the first place, but really to celebrate what humans can do. After all, not everything must revolve solely around the concept of musical work.

So, what 'else' could be causing us trouble? It is remarkably interesting that, by keeping the parallel with marathon running, we discover how ultra-marathons are not in the Olympics. How so? Are 140 miles races not harder on athletes compared to their 26.219 counterparts? Do

ultramarathons not require better training and preparation? And are they not justifiable as an evolution of the discipline that should be worthy of more recognition?

When looking to an answer to such dilemmas it's striking to note that the only reason why such sports are not in the Olympics appears to be their 'unwatchable' nature and the challenge to convey a favourable audience experience. In this sense, could it be that the main issue for new music is to have tied its destiny in the dissemination practices of Western art music? I.e. in the absence of a relevant participation ritual, instead of contributing to shape new ones?

Late musicologist C. Small (1978) observes in-fact that the societal rules of the concert hall are casting their focus on the sovereignty of the musical work. The obligation to the score (*Texttreue*) and the natural evolution towards a *werktreue* ideal (the ideal of fidelity or authenticity), as described by Goehr (1992, p. 243), may indicate that the pedestal on which we hold our tradition has come at the cost of a blindness to perceiving the qualities of all that goes together with the performance—a collection of actions and rituals that go way beyond the scope of a musical work. This makes me believe that the fracture with the greater public is established at the level of the live experience and the fine-tuning of the ritual, which I believe should be associated with the needs of our times, and is not derived in any way by the aesthetic goal and the nature of the repertoire. What it should then mean for us, musicians and composers to make music, to experience music today? What does the current set of societal rules, the ones into which we cast our audiences and to which we require them to comply in order for the music to happen, say about us?

Baricco seems to condemn such conventions too adamantly. He quite provocatively paints a picture where contemporary art and tradition conjure to never quite respond to the public needs. In his view, contemporary Western art music is beneficiary of its relationship with traditional repertoire through the funds and means of the public institutions reserved to the latter, and by the belief that the shared historical connection and intentions between the past and the present suffices to obtain a potential sanctification into the canon—and to account for a bit of malevolence, a further certification of the music's superior value provided by the general public unfavourable reaction. Traditional Western art music on the other end tolerates new music as proof of vitality of the art, counter-excuse from accusations of impersonating a past oriented museum-culture, but most importantly the main justification to not have to change its

crystallized practices and traditions as they appear self-evidently superior to every other kind of musical manifestation.

Paradoxically, both communities are avoiding something, with a tacitly agreed contract that would seem to provide the solutions to both parties' problems: A proven public attendance for new music, even if poorly tolerated, and the status facade for a living and thriving art-form for Western art music.

But what would happen if we instead decided to break those conventions, and rules? When we collectively decide, for example, that it is acceptable for a soloist to perform in jeans and t-shirt; for the attendance to consume beverages and talk freely during a performance; or for a politician to impose music by ABBA in a Symphonic program? Are we not devaluing and contradicting our intentions of sacredness and nobility in an attempt to gain an easier and most immediate response? In other words, are we selling out our precious world, and the conquest of a pure and respectful musical experience to expedient feelings and the cheapness of modernity?

V. Conclusion

The most significant musical experience of my life happened on Dec 7th, 2019, when I attended the season's premiere at La Scala theatre in Milan. Puccini's *Tosca* was being staged. I had never witnessed in my life such a potent manifestation of music: I knew the opera, yet it was all there in front of my eyes and ears, totally absurd and unheralded, and it moved me to tears. Nothing had ever come close to that before. Was it the merit of an impeccable performance by the Orchestra and Maestro Chailly, Puccini's score revealing itself in a different light, or the powerful and all-consuming voice of Netrebko? I would dare say that each and everyone in the audience that night was breathing a different quality of oxygen—magnetic, electrifying. How so? Was it the hefty price paid for a ticket, or the 17 hours of queue in the cold winter needed to reserve a seat, outside the office in via Filodrammatici, or the presence at the event of the many VIPs, the President of the Italian Republic among them? Was it the expensive collection of dresses and tuxedos that looked like they had been sewn by the hands of Giorgio Armani himself, or the fancy banquet offered as a gift to the audience by Dolce & Gabbana?

It could very well be said that the remarkable musical success of that evening was only possible through the combination of those ritual components and how they marvellously interacted with the local culture—a puzzle of not merely imposed pieces, but of individually enacted and pursued tesserae. Season premieres in this sense could very well figure as the pinnacle event for any community and may even suggest an urgent path forward towards a development of the musical experience that is not only much more conscious at the community level, but that could become the prime way to experience community. To collectively understand who we are, through the music act: This is, indeed, 'something else'.

Instead of limiting ourselves to addressing the shift in performing demands brought by the affirmation of the musical record¹—which transforms the collective concept of musical work

¹The musical record has de-facto switched the perception of a musical work, affecting both the musical practice and the live performance experience. This has risen the bar for quality so much that perfection is now always expected, at every performance level. Impeccable is the new requirement for the professionals, and this obligation has brought to surface a strikingly harsh sets of physical and psychological problems for those who aspire to make a career out of their passion for music. The vernacular music world has been affected too, and quite conveniently opted for a different solution, as a strikingly

from performance to that of a digital product—why refuse to recognize that contemporary music may have reached a stage where new paths to dissemination could prove necessary for its sustainability?

If the goal would then be to involve a new public, a new entity, shouldn't we be able to acknowledge that this public won't function just the same as before? A new audience will likely require new traditions, new dimensions, new practices for our music to engage with it, and if so, what type of current rules could work in our favor, and which ones might need to be sacrificed to achieve this?

Something is already moving. On April 16th, 2018, the adjudication of the Pulitzer Prize for music by Kendrick Lamar for his album *DAMN*, an accolade that made him the first rapper and non-classical or jazz musician to receive this award since its introduction in 1943, was received as scandalous by many, even insulting to some (Coscarelli, 2018).

After all, why should the requirements that are at the core of WAM repertoire—the artistically noble intent to elevate or transcend parts of the human experience, the complexity in the listening grammar that would justify the anticipation of a higher reward—be exclusive to Western Art Music? I find such reactions deeply fascinating, and I ask myself, could a path that blurs the practices and means of established genres be a compelling answer?

The greatest detriment to the spread of such an option would then likely come from within the community itself. For example, could contemporary art music ever be accustomed to a fictitious idea of Icelandic singer and songwriter Björk—who has in her career shaped much of the history of vernacular music and who is heavily inspired by German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen—being commissioned to write for the symphonic hall? American composer Caroline Shaw, who on the other hand is a heavily commissioned artist, is releasing some of her new works in the form of music videos and even performing live rearrangements of popular music such as ABBA's *Lay all your love on me* that are dazzling with animosity some of the ears of the most convinced avant-garde artists. Classically trained composer Ludovico Einaudi is enjoying unprecedented success as a composer, so much so that he is not quite considered part of the art-music community by the quasi-totality of his colleagues.

high numbers of performances of such music today are overly supported by pre-recorded tapes and playbacks. sacrificing in my opinion a lot of that potentially transformative ritual experience in favour of a more general and ethically dubious ease: ease of performance, ease of management, ease of delivery.

All these manifestations of art somehow coexist in the world. It could be said that they inhabit different worlds—worlds that can sometimes appear to be in steep conflict with each other—but whose boundaries are blurred by design. If it would be possible to restrain from judging the outputs of these artists, then it could be noted that each and every one of them has taken the opportunity to reshape the listening experience by choosing a distinct way to disseminate their work that is personal, not genre-specific, and tailored to their artistic strengths and needs. And while I am not sure that this path could constitute as a possible way forward for all artists, I remain convinced of the following: The need that our art demands from us to interact, the need for our art to exist in a contemporary, actual, physical world, and thus the need to serve and elevate a public through music. Approaching this perspective, I am reminded of a striking sentence in the novel *The Leopard*: “Se vogliamo che tutto rimanga come è, bisogna che tutto cambi” (Tomasi di Lampedusa, 2013). Which roughly translates to: 'Everything has to change for things to remain the same'.

A new discussion has now been opened, a new chapter awaits, and I can only ask myself: What change would I want to see? What musical world would I like to inhabit as my own? “For as long as there’s a world around, there’s a chance for any music to make its way” (Crumb, 2020).

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