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The Present-day Composer: Performing Individuality and Producing on Commission

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INTRODUCTION

The division of music into art, popular and folk music is a social rather than a stylistic one, and the distinctions between them are maintained through discursive work rather than through musical performance. Still, in research they are normally treated as distinct autonomous sectors functioning according to their own inherent logics. In the research program “The conditions of music-making – between cultural policy, economics and aesthetics”, including researchers at Umeå university Department of Culture and Media Studies and Svenskt Visarkiv (the Centre for Swedish Folk Music and Jazz Research), we try to apply a comparative perspective to them, by focusing on musicians relying on an image of autonomous artistic individuality, regardless of genre.¹ This includes musicians/composers within contemporary art music, jazz, folk and rock/pop – genres all accepted in the Swedish cultural policy grants system, although treated in different ways. Immediately it should be said that although we put the musicians on par with each other, and that the crossing, blurring and dissolution of genre borders are constantly hailed as desirable qualities in music of artistic pretensions, the same borders are effectively at work in the ways music is socially organised, with different clubs, concert halls, radio shows, festivals and academic programs keeping up genre borders just by labelling. As the subtitle indicates, we study how music made with artistic ambitions is produced on fields where the forces of cultural policy, mediatisation, commercialism, event-making, and audiences are in various combinations forming the space available.

SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF CONTEMPORARY ART MUSIC COMPOSITION IN SWEDEN

In this presentation, I draw upon interviews with contemporary art composers in Sweden, a role that for long time has been identified with strong individuals with a distinct personal musical expression. “Art” or “Classical” music is the genre given most public grants in Sweden; still, being a composer of new music is not economically rewarding. Most members of the Föreningen Svenska Tonsättare (the Association of Swedish Composers) – to keep up distinctions, composers of art music formed a highly exclusive association in the 1910s and has ever since kept a high profile, keeping Academy studies and/or activity on the art music scenes as defining conditions – are part-time composers at the most, combining with teaching, studio work, or odd works in any sector. The large part of the public subsidies to art music are taken up by the symphony orchestras and opera companies, thus organisations for the reproduction of music is favoured rather than the production of new music. Although operas and symphonies regularly commission new works, there are but a few composers who have established themselves as first and foremost writing for these organisations. Instead, the majority of composers and their output are aimed at chamber music formats and/or including themselves as performers – the latter a characteristic of the “live electronics” genre.

It is interesting to compare the ideal role of the composer of the fifties and sixties, with the characteristics of the contemporary composers.

Before 1970:

- Genius cult – a select few
- “Spearhead of future” – every work of significance would point forward, and expand the current music; writing for audiences of the future
- Sole creative role – conductors and musicians exist in order to perform the composer’s intentions

¹ The program is funded by Vetenskapsrådet, the Swedish Research Council. A Project description is available at <http://www.kultmed.umu.se/om-institutionen/personal/alf-arvidsson/musikskapandets-villkor/>

- Contextless music – an ideal of the autonomous work added to the list of masterpieces

Now:

- Professional competence
- Contemporary – works are created for use here and now
- Cooperative and adaptive – responding to co-actors' creative ideas
- Context-sensitive music – made, chosen and adapted for different situations

have deliberately made this a series of exaggerated opposites, in order to make clear that the romantic ideals of what an art music composer should be, ideals that still are circulating in public, clashes rather strong with the actual conditions for and aspirations of the present-day composers.

Here, I want to point out three distinct traits that are important for the understanding of contemporary art music – social factors that not only circumscribe the production of music, but also affect the shape of the music, in different ways.

CONTEXT-SENSITIVITY

One thing about new art music is the dependence of different contexts for almost every new work. In high modernist musical thought, every art music work was to be taken as a piece of music, no less and no more. The composer of art music was to write music that was pure music, reflecting only unto itself, with every new work a contribution to the development of music. The written manuscript contained all that was supposed to make up the piece, and there would be an ideal performance that could be reproduced regardless of place and time, if conductor and musicians were sufficiently trained. The introduction of electronic music in the fifties relied partly on the quality of the recording as a definite realization of the composer's intentions.

While this ideal of the context-less music was nothing more than an idea even during high modernism, it was part of a discourse that had consequences for how music was supposed to be composed, as well as how it was to be listened to, understood and judged.

In my interviews with composers on their works, I find not only that the individual works quite often has been written for certain specified situations, but that the works sometimes are possible to perform at one occasion only. In the ideal image of the composer in modernity, there was a presupposition that every good work would eventually be widely known, and through the sales of the score and royalties from recurrent performances and records give a steady income for the serious composer. Today, most income for the composer comes from the commission of the work, perhaps also from the performance of it (paid as musician rather than composer), and there is no need for the composer to write music that can be de- and recontextualized. Instead, for every commissioned work the place, time and people involved in its performance can be adjusted to at maximum, in order to make as much as possible of the unique occasion. Sometimes the result is a work that is hard to separate from its original context; sometimes it is more easily recycled (perhaps with some alterations). Here you may speak of how the situation of the conception of the work affects its musical structure – and this in a much more open way than in former times when music was supposed to rise from the inner driving forces of the composer only.

A couple of examples:

Karin Rehnqvist has some interesting examples among her works. When she was awarded a “composers week” at the Stockholm Concert Hall, she made an inauguration piece that used the Concert Hall and its location at the Hötorget square. For this she involved all the fruit and vegetable sellers in the square to coordinate their seller's calls with a folk singer calling out from the Concert Hall – thus incorporating the everyday sounds from the square, now structured into the performance.

Another example is music she wrote for a concert in the Jukkasjärvi ice Hotel, sponsored by the Swedish Polar Research Secretariat. This concert was centred around instruments built of ice, by Tim Linhart – an orchestra of cello, bass, flute and percussion. In her comments she reflects on specific considerations for this piece: not too long pieces lest the musician's backside freeze to the icy stool. Not too many notes for the flute, so the warm breath doesn't melt the flute before the performance is over.

Another kind of contextualisation is when a work is designed for certain musicians, and they also are drawn into the process of composing, either as active co-operation partners, or by their influence through the interaction process. Henrik Strindberg mentioned how the rehearsals of a new piece with an orchestra made him revise the lay-out of the work: he wanted them to repeat the first seven bars in order to get it right, just as a rehearsal tool, and then realised that this repetition actually was a contribution that increased the aesthetic impact, so he wrote it into the work. This way of working, where the rehearsals can affect the final (?) result and even can be taken in beforehand as part of the process, is normally not possible when writing for symphony orchestras. Another of Strindbergs' works builds upon the co-operation with a violinist who had been exploring the playing techniques of her instrument; thus, the work explores these particular sounds that would not come to his mind were it not for their personal co-operation.

A historically well-known form of contextual composition is writing for ritual and/or ceremonial purposes. European music history up to the 18th century after all is by and large dominated by ritual genres, be it masses, oratorios, hymns or the specific occasional music of royal weddings and funerals. (Sven-David Sandström who was the leading name in Sweden during the 80s and 90s, professor of composition in Stockholm, is most known for his Requiem, a High Mass, and recently a commission from the Church of Sweden for a long series of cantatas.) Today, there is quite a large volume of music being composed for the inauguration of sports events, specifically on the European, World and Olympic Championship levels, where the occasion, site, country of the championship and the ethnicities of the participants may put their marks on the work. Another example is how Martin Q Larsson got a commission for a work for the turn of the millenniums, with the concept of "thousand years in thousand seconds" as ground metaphor. Thus, the work is 16 minutes 40 seconds long and as he used the history of music as signifying material, it gives the effect of showing how short phase of music history the so-called classical music actually represent.

I am not saying that earlier Art music, or specifically High Modern Art Music, not has been context-dependent – it takes a society with modernist discourses to make musical modernism comprehensible – but that the discourses on Art music has changed so that it is not degrading to admit that composition is context-dependent.

THE IMPORTANCE OF RECORDINGS

Another trait that at first seems to stand in conflict with the former is the importance of having a recording, and preferably an official CD release. This is part of music being strongly mediatised in contemporary society. Although the sales of CD:s have been diving for some years and the CD is considered a "dead" kind of goods, The CD album still works as a manifestation and as a well-known format for music. CD:s has not been a significant source of income for art music composers anyway. Instead there are other functions that the recording fills. One is the need for documentation, especially when it is a matter of a one-only performance of a work. Another function ties in with another situation: the need to have a "model performance" for musicians, in the case of a work that raises interest and is asked to be performed in concerts and places where the composer can't attend or have enough time to give sufficient directions. And there is also the visibility that is increased with a CD release,

especially if an established company is involved. Mattias Petersson has another point when he speaks of his diploma piece from the Royal Academy of Music, Ström (Current) that he managed to get released:

It is an example of how I have tried: now I have made this piece, it is 45 minutes long, I have been working on it for two years, I don't want it to be played once and then never more.²

Recordings are also needed when it comes to presenting yourself as composer on the internet. We are living in a world where music is mediatised, and this affects the ways of thinking about and handling music, even when the economic system of mediatised music is not functioning sufficiently.

WHO IS THE DRIVING FORCE?

Finally, the imagined sovereignty of the composer has to be questioned. I propose that the representatives of art music in public today as well as composers can be musicians, and to quite some extent the group, echoing the rock group, can not only be the most visible actors but may just as well be the driving force behind many new works. To begin with, whereas chamber music ensembles up to the sixties were named after their leader, today some at least have more catchy names underlining the group as an autonomous subject: starting in the seventies with Harpans Kraft, in the eighties followed by Fläskkvartetten, Kroumata, Sonanza, KammarensembleN. The most distinguished group in Sweden is Pärlor för Svin (Pärles before Swine Experience), a group with the not-strange-still-odd combination violin, cello, piano and flute, which since it started in 1995 has been a driving force in getting composers to write for them and thereby inducing a large number of new works. They started out of disappointment with the standardised concert formats and settings for contemporary art music, and started the group with two ideas: to try to get gigs at clubs, and to have a repertoire of many short pieces in order to make varied programs. They have been very successful in terms of getting response from contemporary composers and in public interest. However, success does not mean full-time work.

The individual musician as initiator. There is nothing new with musicians ordering music to be written for them; the genres of piano, violin, clarinet etcetera concertos flourished in the 19th century and are still vital. However, today the musician's personal interests and image seem to more often bear direct influence on the musical works. A spectacular example is Jan Sandström's motorcycle concert for the trombonist Christian Lindberg, performed in a shining red leather biker's suite and exploring the possibilities of the instrument to sound as a motorcycle engine. Lindberg, early in his career established as a trombone virtuoso, eventually took control over the repertoire as well, starting 39 years old to write pieces where he explored the possibilities of his instrument (<http://www.tarrodi.se/cl/>).

Mattias Petersson works mainly within electro-acoustic music. Often he also performs his and other fellow composers' music in different groups. His homepage mentions several permanent groups.

I like this – as a composer you may easily become isolated, you sit writing music and then leave the notes and then attend the concert, but in the meantime it is quiet. In working with electronic music, the advantage is that you work directly with the sonic material and you can hear the results immediately. And furthermore, you can as I have play live electronics, and perform your music live to an audience. And since I stopped

² Det är ju också ett sånt exempel på när jag försökt, nu har jag gjort det här, det är 45 minuter långt, jag har jobbat på det i två år, jag vill inte att det ska spelas en gång och sen aldrig mer.

playing piano when I started to compose - I stopped practicing because you can't manage both at the same time – this live-electronics performance becomes a way to return to the musicking and the kick you can get out of standing in front of an audience.³

Together with George Kentros, violinist with Pärles Before Swine Experience, he made a noted reinterpretation of Vivaldi's 4 seasons, one of classical music's most worn out works – starting as a violin/live-electronic duo doing gigs for a couple of years, working out their versions of the pieces before producing a CD in 2008. He also works in the electronica-space making electronic dance music, and is not so keen on keeping the distance to popular music.

As you may have seen, there are in modes of working, social networks, and attitudes quite some similarities to alternative rock music and its Do-It-Yourself-ethos. Composers seem to be taking more and more responsibility for the distribution and performance of their music: arranging festivals, running clubs, running record companies – much of it with little or no pay, just for the satisfaction of getting their music played for an audience. The similarities with alternative rock are further underlined by the fact that many contemporary composers – in Sweden anyway – have a background in rock, jazz or folk scenes; the classical tradition seems to not contribute to its own reproduction.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

I have not spoken much of the individuality in the title of my paper, but it is presupposed that the composer has an individual voice and has something to say with each work made public. That is part of the constitution of art music in contemporary society and one of the reasons for being given the special conditions of cultural policy support. However, the idea of the solitary individual as role model of public man seems to give way to an image of the more versatile and adaptable person functioning in rhizomatic networks; in accordance, the present-day composers shape their individual voices through who they interact with, and get their social value from the situations and contexts they take part of.

³ Jag gillar det här, som kompositör kan man väldigt lätt bli isolerad och man liksom sitter och skriver och sen lämnar man noterna och så kommer man på konserten, men däremellan är det tyst. Där har man fördelen då när man jobbar med elektronisk musik Att man jobbar med själv ljudmaterialet direkt så man kan sitta och , man kan höra och få direkt respons. Men dessutom kan man då, som jag har gjort, spela liveelektronik, och då kan man ju då i princip framföra sin musik live inför publik. Och det är ju, jag tycker det, det har på nåt sätt blivit för mig då, att man får in då för, Jag slutade ju spela piano när jag började komponera på allvar, slutade öva och så där, för Man hinner inte båda två kände jag. Och Då blir det här live-elektronik-spelet blir ett sätt att Komma tillbaka till själva musicerandet och den här kicken man kan få när man står inför en publik som är ganska schysst.