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## How Talented Composers Become Useless

The nice thing about an ism, someone once observed, is how quickly it becomes a wasm. Some musical wasms—academic-wasm, for example, and its dependent varieties of modern-wasm and serial-wasm—continue to linger on artificial life support, though, and continue to threaten the increasingly fragile classical ecosystem. A pair of new Albany CDs of music by Donald Martino, now the Walter Bigelow Rosen Professor of Music Emeritus at Harvard, have recently come my way like a gust of musty air. They prompt me to throw open a window on the miseducation of musicians in America.

One disc, consisting entirely of piano music, is especially dispiriting, precisely because the performances, by David Holtzman, are so superfluously good. The other contains two reissues of Nonesuch LPs (*Notturmo*, Mr. Martino's best-known piece, recorded in 1974, and *Triple Concerto* for three clarinets and chamber ensemble, recorded in 1978). There is also a brilliant performance by Mr. Holtzman of *Pianississimo*, a virtuoso piano sonata composed in 1970 and hailed in its time by Andrew Porter as "a peak of 20th-century piano music." That such a critic could say such a thing of such a work is indeed a sign of times gone by, but there is still something that needs saying about this music.

Once, a long time ago, in a famous article that ever since has served as a bible of academic arrogance, Milton Babbitt tried to laugh the audience's claims on twentieth-century music right out of court. "Imagine a layman chancing upon a lecture on 'Pointwise Periodic Homeomorphisms,'" he wrote. "At the conclusion, he announces, 'I didn't like it.'"

Leaving the snobbery to one side, the analogy did make a philosophical point worth pondering. By comparing "serious" or "original" contemporary

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music to mathematics (and appropriating concepts like seriousness and originality to one kind of music was where the arrogance lay), Mr. Babbitt was saying, in effect, that such music was to be valued and judged not for the pleasure it gave but for the truth it contained. Truth, in music as in math, lay in accountability to basic principles of relatedness. In the case of math, these were axioms and theorems: basic truth assumptions and the proofs they enabled. In the case of music, truth lay in the relationship of all its details to a basic axiomatic premise called the twelve-tone row.

Again, Mr. Babbitt's implied contempt and his claims of exclusivity apart, the point could be viewed as valid. Why not allow that there could be the musical equivalent of an audience of math professors? It was a harmless enough concept in itself—although when the math professors went on to claim funds and resources that would otherwise go to the maintenance of the “lay” repertory, it was clear that the concept did not really exist “in itself”; it inescapably impinged on social and economic concerns. Yet calling his work the equivalent of a math lecture did at least make the composer's intentions and expectations clear. You could take them or leave them. Honestly asserted, they had a certain authenticity, and so did the music.

But now imagine that one engaged Claire Bloom to read “Pointwise Periodic Homeomorphisms” with all the expressive resources of voice and gesture she would bring to the role of Ophelia or Desdemona. Her performance would add nothing to the paper so far as the math professors were concerned. The “layman” would find something to admire in the beauty of her rendition (as anyone listening to Mr. Holtzman's performances of Mr. Martino's compositions on these Albany CDs will surely admire his sterling qualities of touch, timing, and tone). And yet the lack of connection between the content of the utterance and the manner of its delivery would be a constant irritant both for the professors and for the layman. Both would find the performance somehow silly and gratuitous, though their reasons would vary, and though they might both be reluctant to say so. The incongruity would be equally manifest, moreover, whether Ms. Bloom read the paper in the seminar room or on the Stratford stage.

That is the problem with Mr. Martino's piano music, which strives for conventional expressivity while trying to maintain all the privileged and prestigious truth claims of academic modernism. Because there is no structural connection between the expressive gestures and the twelve-tone harmonic language, the gestures are not supported by the musical content (the way they are in Schumann, for example, whose music Mr. Martino professes to admire and emulate). And while the persistent academic claim is that music like Mr. Martino's is too complex and advanced for lay listeners to comprehend, in fact the expressive gestures, unsupported by the music's syntax or semantics, are primitive and simplistic in the extreme.

Insofar as he seeks to be expressive, the composer is forced to do without language altogether. Where Schumann could make his most telling expressive points by means of subtle gradations of harmony, Mr. Martino can be expressive only in essentially inarticulate ways, the way one might communicate one's grossest needs and moods through grunts and body language. Huge contrasts in loudness and register, being the only means available, are constant. The combination of gross expressive gestures for the layman and arcane pitch relationships for the math professors is a perpetual contradiction. It fatally undermines the esthetic integrity of the music.

The only harmonic support the composer can give the expressive surface is the occasional (and by now, old and tired) device of finagling some intermittent consonant harmony out of his serial procedures. Composers who do this call it "tonal implication" or "tonal reference," but it is really nothing of the kind, because tonality is a syntax, not just a vocabulary. Invoking consonance is just another gross distinction, another primitive and largely meaningless gesture.

These may be harsh judgments, but they are necessary ones. Academic composers still maintain a smug front. In a sixtieth-birthday interview Mr. Martino was still blaming everyone but himself for the lack of headway his music had made, despite all his prizes and plum academic posts. He was still heaping Babbittian scorn on "laymen," lobbying, as he put it, for a "potty-trained audience" and contending that "what we need are concert hall bouncers." And, of course, he was still simultaneously bragging that audiences disliked *Notturmo*, his Pulitzer Prize-winning sextet, and whining that his works were not more regularly performed before such audiences.

The reason it is still necessary to expose these hypocrisies, even after the vaunted "postmodern" demise of serialism, is that the old-fashioned modernist position still thrives in its old bastion, the academy. Composers like Mr. Martino are still miseducating their pupils just as he was miseducated himself, dooming them to uselessness. Critics and "theorists," many of them similarly miseducated, are still propagandizing for Pointwise Periodic Homeomorphisms in the concert hall, offering their blandishments as consolation for the loss of a musical language and decrying the attempts of younger composers to find a new one. Excellent performers like Mr. Holtzman, whose recordings of Stefan Wolpe show that his talents can be put to much better use, are still content to seek cozy academic approbation instead of seeking to establish a viable role for new music in the public sphere.

It is not reinforcement in their contempt of audiences, or protection from them, that young composers and performers need, but encouragement in the risky business of establishing a new symbiosis with them. Mr. Martino and his music set an entirely negative example. The only constructive purpose the circulation of these records could serve today would be a cautionary one.

## POSTSCRIPT, 2008

Some faces launch a thousand ships; this piece launched a million words, from angry letters to wild postings to refereed journal articles to whole books. The book—*The Pleasure of Modernist Music*, edited by Arved Ashby (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2004)—takes as its epigraph my opening sentence (about isms and wasms, echoing a witticism encountered by happy chance in an ancient *Saturday Review* piece by Irving Kolodin) and, in its editor's words, seeks "a principled middle ground between two standard polemical positions about modernist music: the one attacking it as elitist, overly intellectual, and often incomprehensible; the other defending it as a music-evolutionary stage deemed 'necessary' but also beyond the reach of words."

The assumption, made explicit by William Bolcom in a contribution to the book that originated as a letter to the *Times*, was that the latter position had provoked the former, at least in academic critics like me. "Taruskin's screed," he wrote, "against what is now anything but a current musical style—so many years after its hegemony—must come from a long-pent-up anger at what was, in its time, an almost fascistic doctrine of historical inevitability adopted by some serialists." At least Bolcom conceded there was once such a hegemony (and backed the point up anecdotally). Others tried to deny it. But the infuriated response to my piece from strong adherents to the style Bolcom wrote off prematurely as passé, convinced as ever of its—and their—historical rights (a short alphabetical list of the better known: Ross Bauer, Martin Brody, Eric Chasalow, Bruce Hobson, Jeff Nichols, Joshua Rifkin, Walter Winslow, Charles Wuorinen, Rolv Yttrhus), belied Bolcom's main premise. His minor premise, that "the music of Donald Martino is proof that a strict twelve-tone composer can still make sensuous and passionate music," was beside the point, because I did not deny it. What I did claim was that such attempts at traditional expressivity within a twelve-tone syntax were likely to be—and Martino's definitely were—crude (and the *Times* obliged with a cartoon, no doubt as infuriating as the article, that showed a long-hair pianist *en frac* performing before an audience of club-wielding cavemen).

For the rest, Ashby's volume is the usual assortment of special pleading, double standards, and invective, leavened by a novel strain of duplicity. That strain was the sudden claim that academic serial music had never differed in its aims or claims from any other kind of music, and was, all of it, conventionally beautiful, and that anyone's refusal or inability to recognize it as such was a form of persecution. This form of defense—of which Fred Everett Maus, a leader in male-feminist and gay/lesbian criticism, has been the pioneer—turns modernist studies into a variety of identity politics, or "victimology" as it is informally known. "Non-tonal compositions are queers in the concert hall,"

Maus reminds us, and if we find fault with them . . . well, the implied threat is plain enough, and odious: a new way of maintaining hegemony, now that the older scientific defense, as Maus acknowledges, has “backfired.”<sup>1</sup>

But this desperate defense is just another abuse of analogy, and it, too, backfires. As I pointed out in the article itself, the claim that the music was closed to nonprofessionals and was only to be evaluated by its practitioners had integrity. Its assertive truth claims were credible; its defensive claim of beauty is not. It was only when its apologists began claiming for academic serialism qualities that lay audiences complained of missing that allegations of bad faith became common, and I was far from the first to advance them. Edward Harsh, reviewing Andrew Mead’s *An Introduction to the Music of Milton Babbitt*, took somewhat sardonic account of the author’s frequent vague references to “the strong emotional and expressive charge” of Babbitt’s music, its “great sensuous beauty,” and its “lasting emotional drama” by observing:

This recourse to the language of common practice aesthetics demonstrates just how much the ground has shifted in recent years beneath the feet of the postwar avant-garde. Challenges to the tenets of modernist thinking (among them the ideology of inevitable, linear artistic progress) have increased of late, and it is these very tenets that in the past have elevated the work of “research and development” composers such as Babbitt. Perhaps the erosion of the ideological foundation that provided unquestioned justification for this body of work has inspired a perceived need in some quarters to reassociate the work of these composers with certain aspects of the “classical music” tradition.

Whatever the motivation, such a rehabilitation is unlikely to succeed in Babbitt’s case. His music stubbornly is what it is, resisting any attempt (even a sympathetic one like Mead’s) to graft onto it aesthetic qualities that its advocates have long rejected. The composer himself has produced a substantial body of prose arguing for his music’s new and radical system of values. All this cannot simply be swept under the rug now that company is coming.<sup>2</sup>

Another sort of methodological abuse (surely it was not just naïveté) was summoned up by Joseph Straus in his retort to me, “The Myth of Serial ‘Tyranny’ in the 1950s and 1960s,”<sup>3</sup> an article that sought to disprove the myth with a simple census of all composers working during the two designated decades. Out of 448 “active American composers” surveyed, the author identifies only 66 (approx. 13.5%) as “serial” and 118 (approx. 23.5%) as “atonal.” The majority was “tonal,” and the smallest group was “experimental.” These relative proportions held fairly steady through a number of other statistical breakdowns: composers teaching at “doctorate-granting universities,” publications, performances and recordings, prizes won, press coverage. All of which proves, according to Straus, that tonal music was dominant throughout the period of alleged serial hegemony.

But Straus's statistics were both meaningless and deviously manipulated, reminiscent of Soviet apologists who loved to pretend that their Communist Party, with only 10 million members, could never dominate a country of 200 million. It is precisely the example of Soviet totalitarianism that demonstrates the power of an organized minority. Nobody has ever alleged that serial music dominated the commercial performance, broadcasting, and recording of classical music, and so to include these figures in the survey was merely a distraction, a classic red herring. Meanwhile, to look for evidence of serialist hegemony in the prizes awarded or teaching jobs obtained in the 1950s or even the 1960s was another disingenuous ploy. In order to measure the influence of serialists in those domains, one must survey the decades in which such composers were found among the senior generations (that is, the ones deciding who got the prizes and the jobs), and those decades were the 1970s and 1980s, when powerful figures like Milton Babbitt at Princeton and the music theorist Allen Forte at Yale placed their trainees everywhere, and when serialists and atonalists were indeed the disproportionate beneficiaries of emoluments. (Recall 1986, when Babbitt, Wuorinen, and George Perle—the last not a twelve-tone composer but often taken for one on account of his role in explicating serial techniques—were all awarded MacArthur Fellowships.)

Straus himself offered some methodological disclaimers, mainly involving the incompleteness of his figures, given the cursory nature of his research. These should already have alerted the editors of the *Musical Quarterly* that the piece was unfit for publication. But the most damning admission was inadvertent, and came early. "Statistics cannot tell the whole story," Straus allowed.

For example, they cannot measure prestige. Certainly serialism in this period commanded an intellectual interest out of proportion to its actual measurable presence on the musical scene. Its outsized prestige derived from a number of factors, including its scientific aura, its association with the most recent European developments, and its simple novelty.<sup>4</sup>

Leaving "simple novelty" aside as a simple gaffe, these are precisely the factors that sociologists study, and music historians are beginning to catch on. To make a serious attempt to answer the questions Straus has set himself, one would need to consider the political structure of American universities and the academic turf wars of the day (here Babbitt's "Who Cares If You Listen?" to which my article made its veiled reference, was especially relevant), patterns of patronage (including the rise of foundations and an analysis of their boards of advisers), and the rhetoric of the cold war as it affected musicians in America and Europe, to name only three particularly obvious areas Straus overlooks. To ignore institutions and mediation and look only at the stylistic orientation and activities of composers is to perpetuate the "poietic fallacy"

that has so blinkered the historiography of twentieth-century music. Straus's innocence of sociology is further attested by his willingness to substitute ill-considered inference for the sort of oral history the subject demands:

Serial composers tended to be younger and were widely viewed as being on the cutting edge of musical fashion. Composers who wanted to identify themselves with a youthful avant-garde may have felt pressure to write serial music. *But such pressure would have been generated internally, not institutionally.* The dominant, senior academic composers, the ones who largely controlled hiring and firing and who admitted and taught the majority of composition students, were largely tonal in orientation throughout the period.<sup>5</sup>

Anyone who studied composition in an American academic institution in the 1960s will recall how the old cowered in those days before the young. The stratum to be watching, in those days, if one wanted to measure the progress of serial composition in the academy, was that of the untenured faculty, not the stratum Straus so unperceptively persisted in calling "dominant." But there is no need to continue this bill of indictment. I find it hard to believe that Straus's article, the work of an established scholar, could have been genuinely so incompetent. Rather, it was a blast of last-ditch propaganda, aimed in the first instance at wringing apologies from miscreants like me, whose writings, in light of Straus's highly selective statistics, "appear as false as they are offensive."<sup>6</sup>

Moving down to the level of postings and letters, there is one such that demands attention because of the journalistic reportage that it elicited. I received a private communication from Reinhold Brinkmann, a German musicologist at Harvard (thus a colleague of Donald Martino), who registered an impassioned protest at what he regarded as a damaging personal attack, reminiscent of the Nazi broadsides at Schoenberg that he remembered from his youth. I replied to him that it would indeed have been a heinous thing were Martino in a vulnerable position, as Schoenberg had been, but that the career of a Harvard professor emeritus in America is no longer in any jeopardy from the likes of me, and his reputation with the general public, being close to nonexistent, was not likely to suffer either from my airing of issues that transcended personalities. I do choose my targets with some discretion.

There would be neither reason nor justification for publicly paraphrasing either Brinkmann's private letter or my private response to it, except that Paul Mitchinson, a Canadian journalist writing in *Lingua franca*, the short-lived academic gossip mag, had already paraphrased Brinkmann's side, playing up the Nazi connection in particular.<sup>7</sup> That makes it both permissible and, I think, necessary to protest an attempt to convict me by association. The Nazis had every right to criticize Schoenberg, as do we all. It is not for their criticism that we all revile them. The confusion of criticism with censorship or worse is one of the paramount vices that chill the free exchange



of ideas. It is nothing more than a crybaby tactic, and those who invoke it when their ox is the one being gored often learn to their cost that it can just as easily cut the other way.

#### NOTES

1. Fred Everett Maus, "Sexual and Musical Categories," in *The Pleasure of Modernist Music*, ed. Arved Ashby (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2004), 159, 170.
2. Edward Harsh, review of Andrew Mead, *An Introduction to the Music of Milton Babbitt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), *Music Library Association Notes* 52 (1995–96): 788–89.
3. Joseph Straus, "The Myth of Serial 'Tyranny' in the 1950s and 1960s," *Musical Quarterly* 83 (1999): 301–43.
4. *Ibid.*, 303.
5. *Ibid.*, 310; italics added to underscore the most counterfactual assertion.
6. *Ibid.*, 334; Straus's paper received a strong retort in its own venue from Anne C. Shreffler, who pointed out in conclusion that "the 'rightness' of the path [of serial music in the academy] was supported by the political, ideological, and cultural status of this music, which functioned independently of the beliefs of any individual composer" ("The Myth of Empirical Historiography: A Response to Joseph N. Straus," *Musical Quarterly* 84 [2000]: 30–39, at 36).
7. Paul Mitchinson, "Settling Scores," *Lingua franca* (July–August 2001): 40.