

Chapter Title: From the Sixties to the Present Day Contemporary Musical Life in the Light of Five Characteristic Features

Book Title: Music of the Twentieth Century

Book Subtitle: A Study of Its Elements and Structure

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Published by: Amsterdam University Press. (2005)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt46n27q.14>

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From the Sixties to the Present Day

Contemporary Musical Life in the Light of Five Characteristic Features

It is hardly sufficient to discuss the newest developments in music exclusively in terms of their manifestation in the music world at large. Much of what is happening today reaches the public concert circuit only occasionally, if at all. Naturally, the same applies to the media and the music press in so far as they, in turn, form a reflection of events in the concert world. I have therefore drawn on a second source in order to obtain a wider view of the contemporary scene. Every year since 1960 I have enjoyed the privilege of seeing tens and sometimes hundreds of new scores and, as a composition teacher, jury member and workshop director, coming into contact with similar numbers of young composers from all over the world. And although this again forms a limited and subjective picture, the combination of information from both sources has at any rate given rise to a different interpretation, to a hierarchy of values which does not always correspond with generally accepted opinion.

A first consequence of my view is that I prefer not to take the customary year 1968 as starting point for a discussion of the most recent period of contemporary music. If there is a turning point at all, I would place it somewhat earlier, in the course of the 1960s. For the innovations of the preceding period took place largely in the fifties, and the first signs of change became visible quickly afterwards. The newest period in music therefore spans some thirty years and reveals an exceptionally complex and multicoloured picture. I have attempted to distill five characteristics which I believe to be of importance to both the present situation and its further development.

1. The geographical distribution of musical activity

An increasing amount of contemporary music is written in other parts of the world. What began in Japan now extends to Korea, China, Taiwan, Indonesia, the Philippines and other Asiatic lands, as well as hitherto almost unknown African and South American countries. Any future musicologist making a study of the second half of the twentieth century will therefore have to take into account a broad and diffuse distribution of creative activity across the entire world, rather than the mere transfer of musical centres (previously mainly limited to Europe and the USA).

Such countries, it is sometimes said, have made a late start and need to do

some 'catching up'. Does this imply that their composers must undergo the same evolution as we have experienced, and conform to our norms? Or may we expect them to go their own way and defend other values? The latter would seem a good deal healthier. Music is not an international language, however often and unhesitatingly this is claimed. Any musical idiom is the result of a long cultural tradition. Where international conformity occurs at so many levels, it is for the artist to do justice to the variegated wealth of our multicultural society.

This struggle is undertaken with varying success by many non-Western composers. Most remain in the shadow, through lack of resources or unfavourable local conditions. Some have achieved a certain recognition: Yuasa, Takemitsu and Ichyanagi (Japan), Chou Wen Chung and Tan Dun (China), Isan Yun (Korea), Slamet Sjukur (Indonesia), Jose Maceda (the Philippines), Essayed (Morocco) and others. For most of them the Western model has been the decisive factor. It would be incorrect, however, to estimate their significance entirely in these terms.

The participation of so many non-Western composers has undoubtedly contributed to the most striking phenomenon of the 1970s: the massive return to tonal or modal, or at any rate diatonic, composition. The significance of this cannot always be estimated. Where an atonal period has not occurred one cannot speak of a return. On the other hand, one may have expected east European composers, after the collapse of the Iron Curtain, to plunge into the once forbidden atonal avant-garde style, but this reaction has not followed. Reversion to a diatonic style may of course result from a certain conservatism, or a submission to consumptive expectations. But this is not enough to account for the phenomenon. Despite the brilliant results of historical atonality, one wonders whether this was not a typically central European product, based too closely on the Western tempered tuning. Viewed within the present perspective, atonality would appear to be a finishing point rather than a starting point.

EXPANSION AND STABILISATION. Even where the influence of the atonal avant-garde style of the preceding period is still felt, one can no longer speak of radical innovation. The greater part of contemporary music production leans on the accomplishments of the fifties, including serial, statistical and aleatory techniques, spatial performance, electronic resources, new notation symbols and suchlike. In this sense our period is comparable to that of 1920-1945, when innovations from the beginning of the century were subject to expansion and stabilisation. The new post-1960 generations have not produced the type of 'forerunner' who attracts crowds of composers. The names of senior figures such as Boulez, Stockhausen, Cage, Ligeti and Berio therefore still dominate the official picture. Boulez exercises great influence on Cartesian France, Ligeti leaves his mark on north European composers, while the phe-

nomenon of Cage is still evident in many mature and immature endeavours to achieve the 'liberation of sound'.

All this is not to say that no characteristic developments have occurred in the most recent period. I would mention the most important ones here:

New playing techniques – The passion for detail among serial composers of the fifties has instigated the further exploitation of new playing techniques. If each note in a serial score is the resultant of predetermined pitches, durations and dynamics, therefore differing from each preceding note, this requires the utmost concentration on the part of the performers. But the latter hardly wait passively! From the very beginning performing artists have set their mark on new music: the flautist Severino Gazzelloni, singer Cathy Berberian, pianist David Tudor, percussionist Christoph Caskel, trombonist Vinko Globokar and the Dutch bass clarinetist Harry Sparnaay. Through the stimulation provided by such players a large number of new scores have seen the light of day, scores that have become more and more demanding on the performer. Today these accomplishments would seem to have become common property: much new music presupposes as a matter of course notation methods and performance techniques that would have been inconceivable fifty years ago. Naturally, this influences the musical idiom which, generally speaking, tends towards greater sound differentiation.

The pursuit of more complex structures – The process of increasing differentiation is encouraged by another simultaneous development among a number of composers: the pursuit of more and more complex musical structures. In Europe in particular there is a true fascination with complicated and highly developed techniques, a tendency already evident in the early works of Stockhausen, Boulez and Xenakis. In the seventies and eighties it has led to the work of figures such as Brian Ferneyhough, who has reached and sometimes exceeded the boundaries of what is playable and perceptible.

Minimalism – In our period such extreme attitudes have brought sharper definition to contrary tendencies. Extreme complexity has its antithesis in minimalism, a predominantly American movement which became popular in the seventies in particular. A different but equally characteristic contrast is that between composers occupied with abstract categories of thought, formalisation processes, computer research and such, and colleagues at the other extreme who pursue a most simple type of music and aesthetic, from the American Philip Glass to recent works by the Polish composer Henryk Gorecki.

Electronic music – A characteristic of our time that may not be neglected is the further development of electronic music. As we know, the first elementary electronic studios were set up around 1950. A major step in technical terms was the introduction of voltage control in the mid-sixties. The advent of the computer shortly afterwards was a great occurrence, although the first results in the field of music were hardly spectacular. I recall a speaker at a symposium in California in 1977 who chalked a board full with numbers and

tables, but in the end only produced one or two meagre sounds resembling a bassoon. Technology moves faster than music. In my opinion composers have dwelt too long on tone synthesis, the pursuit of new timbres. In the past ten or fifteen years in particular there seems to have been more interest in the potential contribution of the computer with regard to our structural concepts of music. This is a much more interesting field, but a great deal of time and energy is still required to master the associated technical problems.

Enrichment of acoustic instruments – Electronic resources are also employed to extend and enrich existing acoustic instruments. In early days, around 1960 I believe, contact microphones and suchlike were employed during live concerts to transform traditional instruments. This certainly produced interesting results, but only after about 1985 was methodical research undertaken in this field. An example is the activity of the Media Laboratory of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Boston, where some 200 researchers work on new communication machines. On the musical side the composer and cellist Tod Machover is involved there in what he calls *hyperinstruments*. Existing instruments are linked to microcomputers via newly developed interfaces. Every movement of the player, the speed and pressure of the bow, the angle between hand and bow etc., are tracked by sensors and reproduced in an enlarged or transformed mode. Here technology functions as a sort of magnifying glass to bring out the tiniest subtleties of human expression. How this will be reflected in composition of the future we cannot foresee, but it is quite clear that by then we will be miles removed from today's synthesizers and their prefabricated sounds.

It is understandable that such developments occur mainly in affluent countries. Considerable funding is required for this research: the Media Laboratory is sponsored by Apple and Yamaha among others.

The Dutch situation – Before I round off this panoramic overview a few words should be said about the situation in the Netherlands. In comparison with most other countries the picture is positive: we have a favourable climate for new music, a reasonably effective infrastructure, government support, institutions, ensembles etc. This has contributed to the prosperity of Dutch music, bringing to fruition the forebodes of the first half of the century. But we should entertain no illusions, for we remain a small country. Our cultural export is minimal, while as of old we have the perhaps somewhat provincial tendency to import all sorts of things from abroad. Naturally, this also has its advantages, and in Amsterdam one can hear more international music than in most other cosmopolitan cities. Judging from my experience in the past forty years, however, most imported new music is not superior, and is indeed sometimes inferior to that of the ten best composers whom our country boasts.

The whole span of Dutch music production fits well within the main contours of the European tradition: expressionism, constructivism, neo-classicism, neo-romanticism. One development, however, forms an exception and

perhaps displays typically Dutch traits. It would be incorrect to give it a name in view of the diversity of composers involved: from Louis Andriessen, Guus Janssen, Paul Termos, Willem Breuker, Gilius van Bergeijk and Chiel Meyering to, more recently, Rob Zuidam. As everywhere, this development has not brought technical innovation to the musical language: composers continue to draw from the arsenal of resources available from 1950 and before. But common to all is a certain aversion to the conformism, abstraction and ponderousness of much contemporary music. Influences are therefore most divergent and include many American elements: jazz, pop and minimal music. The American forerunners were John Cage, Robert Ashley and La Monte Young, with emphasis on live performance, happenings, music theatre and suchlike. Correspondences, however, are psychological rather than stylistic. The general idea is to let some fresh air into a sometimes rather mouldy and academic modernism.

But from fresh air one can catch cold. A surplus of inventiveness and frivolous novelties may sometimes be at the expense of genuine engagement and visionary imagination.

To summarise, the music composed in the most recent period is characterised by broad geographical distribution, extension of innovations of the preceding period, and a rich range of trends. Concepts based on a single-track, straight-line evolution from central Europe belong once and for all to the past.

2. Interaction between different cultures

One of the most important aspects of the recent period is the interaction of different cultures on a planetary scale. This development too naturally has a long history, but in the sixties a decisive step was taken thanks to music technology. The availability of recordings made it possible for the first time to become acquainted on a large scale with the most divergent music cultures, thus opening up a domain hitherto only familiar to a handful of specialists. In the development of creative talent the very first musical impressions are of great significance. How differently may a composer develop if in his most impressionable years he experiences not only the shock of Beethoven or Berlioz, but also of Guillaume de Machaut, Indian classical music or Japanese biwa playing. Nevertheless, a breakthrough did not occur in this period, and the significance of this phenomenon, in Europe at least, was strongly underestimated. A dominating Eurocentric undercurrent was and remains active. While the entire world opened up, young composers continued even after 1960 to debate the pros and cons of atonality, Stravinsky and the like. And in the seventies mature composers such as Henze, Berio and Kagel still found it necessary to paraphrase Wagner, Mahler and Beethoven. And neo-romanticism, this typically late-European product, still rings on in the present work of the German composer Wolfgang Rihm.

There are other sounds as well, of course. Among the most talked-about composers of the older generation are Olivier Messiaen and Karl-Heinz Stockhausen. Though opinion differs on their work, one thing is certain, and that is that both have engaged in a confrontation with non-Western cultures that goes further than the customary musical tourism encountered in so much contemporary music.

Only from about 1980 has a further breakthrough occurred in the music of the youngest generations. This took place earlier in America and, to a greater degree, among composers from other parts of the world who became involved in the confrontation between local cultures and dominating Western influence.

The interaction of cultures in contemporary music is the central theme of an international workshop in which I have been closely involved from its beginnings in 1977. In the first years it was still necessary to point out the importance and inevitability of this process, but more recently this seems to have become a matter of course among participants. Their musical and cultural horizons have broadened, gaining more and more genuine significance in the process of composition. In the present context I can mention only a few of the questions that they have addressed:

- The identity problem: to which group, to which culture, to which tradition do I belong? (An urgent question, particularly for a number of non-Western composers.)
- Even if I have been essentially affected by a different music culture, how can I translate it with contemporary resources?
- Are the different idioms compatible?
- What are the technical implications?
- To what extent must I investigate the background of the other culture?

In short, one becomes interested in quite different problems to those of preceding generations. In its most radical form this is a change of mentality. The concept of tradition gains new content: it is not a licence for conservatism, nor is it based on nationalist or ethnocentric sentiments. The entire cultural heritage of humanity is unprecedentedly rich and diverse. The most vital question that can be posed is whether this offers fertile soil for future musical developments. If we wish to address this, we will need to take account of significant counterforces. Growing multicultural awareness contrasts strongly with the centralised bureaucracy and technocracy of modern states, the cultural hegemony of a number of larger lands and the associated suction of national chauvinism, and, finally, a world economy that encourages conformity – via music commerce – rather than a pluricultural society.

3. *Female composers*

Before discussing one last major aspect of our time I would draw attention to two phenomena which, while perhaps less conspicuous, are important enough to be mentioned.

In the first place, the most recent period has witnessed an increasing number of female composers. I have no statistics and can only speak from my own personal experience. When I began teaching composition in 1961 I had only male students. At the end of my career, in the mid-eighties, it was usual to have at least a few female candidates for my composition class. At the workshop mentioned above, held this year in Amsterdam, eight female composers participated alongside ten males, all young people from very different countries. But among older generations too women's names crop up frequently, including the Dutch Tera de Marez Oyens, the Russian Sofia Gubaidulina (also known in Holland), Jacqueline Fontijn (working in Belgium), the French Betsy Jolas and the American Pauline Oliveros. Younger female composers making their way into the music world include Doina Rotaru from Romania, the Finnish Kaya Saariaho and the Australian-Chinese Lisa Lim.

I would hesitate to comment on the background to this phenomenon. These are certainly not incidental cases as in days past, and if this tendency continues the question will arise of its influence on future composition and musical thought. Whatever the case may be, my own experience is that women are no less capable than men in matters of composition technique: creative talent, musical intelligence, grasp of form and technical command.

4. *Music outgrows the concert hall*

I would like to illustrate a second tendency, felt under the surface but not to be neglected, with the later work of Morton Feldman. His music does not last the customary ten or twenty minutes: the *Second String Quartet* (1983) lasts six hours, and *For Philip Guston* takes four-and-a-half hours. The composer apparently assumes a different way of listening, not compatible with the measured enjoyment of the classical concert programme. In other words: music outgrows the concert hall. How we are to deal with this situation is not clear, and although radio and recordings go some way to help, their scope is limited.

In 1965 I worked for a year on a composition which was doomed in advance to be barred from the concert hall: *Spatial Music I*. Its organisation is so complex, due to the fact that the orchestra is completely split up by separating all the players, that it can only be realised adequately in a radio studio with all appropriate technical help. Indeed, it took no less than a week to record it.

A little later, and with other socio-cultural motives, music groups went out onto the streets. And here we have different principles, a different audience,

and other acoustic conditions. All this must be of influence on the musical result; it is no music for the concert hall.

From 1963 the Philippine composer Jose Maceda made intensive use of indigenous instruments and musical forms, intending his work for performance in the open air and for an audience 'living in a modern tropical world', to use his own words. This culminated in 1974 in a work entitled *Ugnayan* (Interaction), involving twenty radio stations and the predetermined participation of inhabitants of the city of Manila and six Philippine provinces.

Finally, we have the vast production of electronic music, which is indeed heard in concert halls, but only because it has no authentic medium of its own.

The above symptoms have little to do with the demand for multifunctional concert halls, for we are not concerned here with alternative auditoriums but with 'music beyond the concert hall'. In the most recent period no feasible alternative has been found, and a solution would probably require profound changes in social structures and the function of music within them. Most composers therefore continue to produce pieces of ten, twenty or thirty minutes which fit nicely into traditional concert programmes.

5. *Musical life under pressure*

And so we come to the final but dominant characteristic of our period: the great economic and commercial pressure on the music world. As a rule, a healthy interaction may exist between musical life and material prosperity. The problem begins, however, when the activities and final products of that musical life are excessively determined by economic and commercial criteria. Today this phenomenon is felt almost everywhere, though of course it is most evident in the world of light music.

Mass production – Let us begin by observing that at the beginning of the twentieth century jazz was still undergoing an organic and natural development, before being discovered by the commercial world. The evolution of pop music, on the other hand, was closely bound up from the very beginning with the international music industry that arose at the same time. In our period pop music and all related genres have therefore acquired a gigantic share in the supply of music. A genuine mass production has emerged, conditioning the way many millions of people throughout the world listen. It is a sign of hope that artistically acceptable sounds are still heard from time to time, but most of it is polished in overcrowded recording studios to become a pure consumption product.

Economic interests are of the utmost importance here, as is illustrated by the fact that last year the gramophone industry (now mainly CDs and cassettes) had a turnover of thirty million dollars... Thirty years ago, in the days of The Beatles, music management was not yet entirely geared to this large scale, but today the production machine is a well-oiled affair. Five multina-

tionals have a monopoly in this business: BMG, PolyGram, Warner, EMI and Sony. In recent years sales have also been undertaken by the larger supermarkets, where everything is viewed in terms of quick success and fast consumption.

Musical pollution – Background music forms an important by-product of the music industry. I consider this to be one of the most disastrous developments in the latest period. The never ceasing and hardly avoidable musical idiocy to which we are exposed today can only have a stupefying and blunting effect on the human mind. Music is nourishment for the human organism. Even before birth many millions of babies are already conditioned from day to day by the musical poverty that is poured out non-stop by a comparable number of loudspeakers. Here we find the musical counterpart of the increasing pollution seen in other areas of life.

Bureaucracy – In the world of classical music all this is more subtle, and the unsuspecting music addict may not notice it much. But here again we are confronted by signs of inflation, overproduction, classical 'top hits', a play-it-safe supply of music, the cultivation of top stars, and somewhat overheated publicity promoting 'world-famous' soloists and ensembles.

An additional problem is the top-heavy organisation structure of our music world. The complexity of modern society is reflected in a rather complicated network of persons and institutions without which the music world could no longer function. We have come a long way from the first, usually local and elementary organisation forms established by early nineteenth-century dignitaries to supply the bourgeoisie with orchestral concerts. Today matters revolve around managers, commercial directors, advisory committees, sponsors, trade unions, public bodies, impresarios etc. In this dense network we may still bump into the occasional music enthusiast who puts his time and energy into a good cause. But the present economic and organisational problems require – rightly – the participation of specialists in various fields – organisational, financial, legal etc., – resulting in a conflict of interests that does not always further an artistic vision.

It is clear that the role of this buffer group as an unavoidable link between musician and audience weighs heavily. For the management of the music world, new music is a particularly troublesome, economically uninteresting and marginal phenomenon. In many cases the widespread thirst for premieres witnessed today goes to conceal a lack of artistic conviction among programme makers. Just as one current event drives away the other in the news media, one premiere follows the other in the music world. A genuine and enduring interaction between composer and audience is no longer possible.

Consequences – In their urge to communicate, creative talents react to this situation, whether consciously or unconsciously. They have come to resemble speakers talking louder and louder in a noisy auditorium. If the success of a work depends on a single performance, there is a logical tendency to be spectacular and 'original', or to dramatise the musical discourse in an exaggerated

manner. Much of today's so-called neo-expressionism has only its rhetoric in common with the authentic expressionism of the early twentieth century. Other composers seek refuge in political engagement, in compromise, or simply in the abandonment of their craft.

All this impedes genuine innovation. The majority of the composers known to me all over the world have little or no scope to develop, and therefore miss the necessary feedback from an audience. The naive belief that real talent will be discovered later may have been true in bygone days, but the mechanisms that control modern musical life rule this out almost completely.

Epilogue

The most important developments observed in the latest period are of an extramusical nature: the enormous geographical distribution of creative activity, the growing awareness of the fact that we live in a multicultural world with the associated signs of acculturation, and, finally, the strongly increased international economic and commercial pressure on musical life. All this gives rise to opposing forces which are difficult to control.

The modern composer can do little about all this. But it is precisely his marginal role as a creative artist in contemporary society that should enable him to consider matters from a distance and become aware of that which is essential. This could induce the perception that genuine innovation in music can no longer be based primarily on aesthetic and/or technical principles, but must be of a spiritual nature, in the broad sense of the word, as the only possible counterpart to our materialistically orientated society.

From: *Muziek in de 20e eeuw*, ed. J. Nuchelmans, 1995