

**Composer's Corner II:
Crafting one's voice**

Abstract

This is the second article in a six-part serial on the following topics: I: “The composer’s identity within the historical narrative,” II: “Crafting one’s voice,” III: “Horse or artist?,” IV: “The composer in exile,” V: “A work in progress – *Concerto for bayan and orchestra*,” and VI: “Aesthetics and accessibility in the 21st-Century.” This article focuses on creating an identity or intangible but unifying essence in one’s (for lack of a better word) “style.” Questions posed include: precisely what does it mean to have a “voice?” Does this imply that each of us has a unique something to say, that it is merely a matter of discovery and a willingness to express? Do we mean by uniqueness to suggest a primacy of novelty over other aspects of the musical result?

Introduction

This article will focus on creating an identity or intangible but unifying essence in one's (for lack of a better word) "style." The first question posed concerning crafting one's voice is: precisely what does it mean to have a "voice?" Does this imply that each of us has a unique something to say, that it is merely a matter of discovery and a willingness to express? Do we mean by uniqueness to suggest a primacy of novelty over other aspects of the musical result? For this author, the issues raised here are extremely complex and could easily comprise an independent volume of several hundred pages length. However, it might prove beneficial to consider the core questions in a brief discussion such as this.

What is a musical voice?

Quantifying the appeal of any artist can be challenging. More than this, music is a transitory art form, one that exists in time not two- or three-dimensional space. Perhaps to compensate for this vexing facet of music, too often the appraisal of a musical performer's ability centers nearly exclusively upon technique. Although technique is quantifiable, it is certainly not the defining aspect of a performer's appeal. Often, the appeal is precisely indefinable, which perhaps lends it its charm.

Similarly, a composer's voice is an intangible element eluding substantive description. For example, I have heard many intelligent people speak at length about the unity of Stravinsky's voice across the dramatic stylistic shifts of his career. However, I have yet to hear someone define the unifying feature underlying these transformations with anything approaching precision. When we speak of a composer's voice we often refer to the calculable musical parameters of his/ her approach. We discuss Stravinsky's use of rhythm, texture, orchestral color, etc. in his early works as if the summation of these different parameters could somehow compose the complete artist. Then, we look at a later period work and discover that these parameters have changed, yet the composite whole somehow gives us an intimation of the same personality, the same "voice."

I contend that we must be prepared to abandon precision in attempting to define the unique voice of any artist. According to this logic (or truth) no matter how one addresses the different concrete and quantifiable parameters of musical structure, he/ she cannot control the outcome of voice, character, or personality. In my encounters with the emerging generation of composers, the most consistent piece of advice I give is to express oneself honestly. I believe that to discover one's unique expression is to allow the internal self to come forth genuinely and without inhibition. This is not something that can be taught or, in fact, controlled. It may only be encouraged. Unfortunately, in my opinion the dominant, institutional approach to composition in academia has failed to recognize the inability (in fact, the contraindication) to control the unique instincts of the composer with positive effect. Instead, too often composition educators either avoid the issue altogether by concentrating on techniques of notation or markedly emphasize innovation, pre-composition, and complexity as the primary concerns of the contemporary composer.

The Legacy of Innovation in the Post-Modern World

Perhaps the greatest fallacy adopted by the dominant forces¹ in twentieth-century “Western” Art Music (WAM) was the primacy awarded innovation. Maybe as a result of issues raised in my previous essay,² the value placed on complexity also exerted dramatic effects. The merit of specific works of art shifted from their *emotional and/or intellectual impact* to the *process* by which they were created. In music, dodecaphony exemplifies (and arguably instigated) the compulsion toward innovation because it represents the first drastic, absolute, and self-conscious rupture from the gradually evolving historical narrative that had presaged it.³ It embodies the move toward complexity for the favor it bestows upon pre-compositional abstractions, adopted from extra-musical disciplines such as mathematics.⁴ The true legacy of dodecaphony lies not in the pitch structuring – which, despite its notoriety barely persisted for a few decades – but rather the unquestioned propensity to invent systematic, intellectually conceived, and extra-musical approaches to composition. In this way, the Schoenberg revolution compelled future generations to focus disproportionate emphasis upon these two elements, arguably to the detriment of other considerations.⁵

I will provide the reader with an analogous example of what is valued in art. On youtube⁶ I came upon an Argentine artist, Leandro Granato, who is gaining attention for his technique of production. His process involves squirting paint out of his eye socket onto canvas. The result is splashes of abstract color that could have been produced in myriad ways (I’m thinking: use a squirt gun, dude). Due in part to the metaphorical appeal of this method – the artist “crying out” his works – Granato has achieved sensational response largely due to his pre-compositional innovation, not for the resultant works. The value of these works (surely excessive) is in their process, not in the response they induce from the observer. Although the story of how a work of art is achieved is certainly important, when it assumes the works entire relevance then I would argue that the connection between the artist and his audience is, for the most part, lost.

¹ By this I refer to the aesthetes, critics, and intellectual elites of “Western” Art Music (WAM), not the publishers, orchestra managers, performers, or typical audience members.

² I here refer to the first article in this series.

³ One might argue that the propensity toward rejection of the past appeared long before Schoenberg. This proclivity can be seen in Romantic program music as a rejection of “absolute” art, the Classical period rejection of the *rococo* ornate, the derogatory attitude of the *rococo* toward pre-existent symmetry, etc. Although these developments represented small upheavals against their respective pasts, they were not advancement for advancement’s sake nor were they a total break from the preceding semantic/ syntactical approaches. By comparison the dodecaphonic movement was a Copernican revolution. For the first time in music history, a composer consciously sought the abandonment of the pre-existent, predominant musical organization: functional and hierarchically conceived relationships to a central pitch, the pseudo-Newtonian gravity of the tonal center. This shift sought change out of a quasi-technological pursuit of “progress.” Although he claimed his place as the “logical extension of the German Romantic tradition,” simply by the nature of his career and that of his students, one may recognize that he placed a higher priority on progress (innovation) than upon other aesthetic issues.

⁴ i.e. matrix, permutation, etc.

⁵ Of course, derivative trends also developed as a result, often as a reaction to the focus upon complexity.

⁶ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=11itHuYxeL4&feature=player_embedded. 9.24.11

In the belief of its proponents, twelve-tone music represented progress.⁷ Arguments at the inception of dodecaphony did not focus on whether progress – at least to the extent that it implies an intentional and self-conscious disconnection from the past – is actually good for music or, in a larger sense, art. Rather, progress was implicitly accepted as the primary goal for future “schools” and “movements.” Due to the legitimacy given dodecaphony, the primacy of innovation quickly predominated and went virtually unopposed, even when dodecaphony itself came rather quickly to be viewed as passé.⁸ In subsequent generations, the focus upon innovation became yet more explicit⁹ and, due to the relegation of WAM to academia, this focus on innovation greatly favored complexity. For some time and especially in certain communities, voices were either demoralized or actively silenced where they were not considered sufficiently complex. Even where composers chose to avoid complexity, they often did not reject innovation as a fundamental pursuit.¹⁰

Crafting One’s Voice

The focus on complexity has lost its hegemonic status,¹¹ at least in the Americas. However, the emphasis upon innovation remains predominant. Having attended myriad lectures and master classes of established and emerging composers, I attest that the most common element is focus upon compositional process – how the artist’s work derives from a great deal of pre-compositional organization or the uniqueness of presentation in the score – and how either facet distinguishes the presenter from ALL other composers, past or present. Certainly, I have encountered exceptions in this regard but the majority seems motivated more by finding a *process*, *notation*, or *advanced technique* that will distinguish. Simply put, composers tend to concentrate too little on expressing or inspiring hyper-linguistic *responses*. I believe this detracts from, in fact disables the capacity to produce meaningful artworks.

This milieu seems to present a challenging setting for contemporary composers, as well as composition educators. If a composer chooses to follow the paradigm outlined above, at best his or her impact will be relegated to an extremely small subculture of the

⁷ I realize that this word is extremely loaded. In musicology, we love to argue about the efficacy of a word such as this.

⁸ Due in large part to the primacy of innovation.

⁹ See Milton Babbitt’s famed article, “Who Cares if they Listen?” for an unambiguous example.

¹⁰ From this view, for any composer to gain the esteem of his colleagues, he or she had to seek legitimacy through the composition of an entirely new language or approach, which is, of course, to focus on innovation. Then and afterwards, composers were left to extend serialism to domains other than pitch (Boulez, Stockhausen, Babbitt, etc.), invent new analytical methods as guides (Hindemith), invent or rediscover ancient modes or exotic scales (Bartok, Messiaen), invent new approaches to or exoticize rhythm (Carter, Ligeti), roll dice to determine pitches (Cage), invent new ways of organizing pitch (Lutoslawski), invent entirely new notational systems (Penderecki, Crumb), re-invent traditional instruments (Lachenmann, Sciarrino), invent new terminologies to justify triadic or diatonic writing (Pärt, Reich, etc.) and on and on, *ad infinitum*. I do not suggest that these composers are inferior for having been innovative. I simply point to our tendency to compartmentalize them according to their “contribution.” Almost nowhere do we find composers considered “important” without being deemed “innovators,” except perhaps composers living under Stalin. Here, composers like Shostakovich and Prokofiev are pardoned – by the “school of innovation” – for an inferred fear of political subjugation.

¹¹ Although it is certainly still alive and well.

contemporary world, then probably forgotten. On the other hand, I would not advocate that composers abandon intelligent or novel approaches altogether. Of course, new ideas can be wonderful and we should continue to be curious about the potentialities of music.

Ironically, I believe that the above conditions have created a fantastic setting for the creation of new and meaningful works. Thanks to the innovations of the past century, we have the opportunity to explore myriad resources that I believe have not been fully exhausted. Since so many composers of the recent past felt compelled to invent completely new approaches, we have a morass of rich and partially vetted materials with which to work. I believe it is quite possible to continue exploring the life work of the most radical and innovative composers of the recent past, to synthesize these approaches with each other and with other possible traditions, and to interact with the composer's immediate surroundings using these tools. As long as the composer remains honest and has something meaningful and relevant to convey to the audience, the intelligent application of these tools is almost certain to inspire and delight.