

Economics of New Music

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ABSTRACT

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Economics of New Music begins with an examination of the idea that there is a crisis in classical music, with specific reference to new music. The terms “classical music” and “new music” are given a contextual definition in the Introduction. The alleged crisis is discussed in terms of recordings sales, audiences, and music education, and also covers radio and the fear of piracy; this discussion forms Chapter I. Chapter II examines further evidence, emerging trends, and new technology, and reconsidering the issues raised in Chapter I, concludes that while there may be a downturn in some areas, there is in fact great cause for optimism overall, indeed that the industry is experiencing a paradigm shift rather than a “crisis”. I then go on – in Chapter III – to examine these emerging trends, which I identify as the signs of an “Age of Mass Connection”, in cultural-critical and then economic terms. I begin with a comparison to Walter Benjamin’s “Age of Mechanical Reproduction” and include a critique of the iPod and an examination of Chris Anderson’s “Long Tail” concept in the context of the cultural paradigm shift. Finally, in Chapter IV, I consider further the “Long Tail”, the laws governing “Group-Forming Networks”, and supply and demand curves for new music. I examine the economic circumstances (in this new Age) of the individual composer, and then for composers and the new music “market” overall, concluding with suggested models for composers which take advantage of certain aspects of the new era.

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Introduction

Western classical music – and in particular the composers of new music today – is experiencing a paradigm shift. This shift is felt in the way music is “consumed” by the listening public, and “produced” by composers, and is primarily due to the enormous cultural impact of new technologies: the Internet and digital files. The shift is a move from a landscape characterised by fluctuating fortunes and a perpetual (or at least perennial) sense of “crisis” towards one of great and enduring opportunity, particularly for the new. This is not simply an economic shift, although economics play an instrumental part; it is also driving deep and significant cultural changes. I will discuss first the sense of crisis, and how the causes and manifestations of the alleged “crisis” are radically changing. I will examine the extent to which there really is a crisis (and I am sceptical of this idea) by first describing the conventional case for a crisis (in Chapter I), and then by analysing these claims in more detail (in Chapter II). Thus, the argument is framed as a whole over two chapters as indicated by combining the chapter titles: “Crisis! ...What Crisis?”. This discussion leads finally to the paradigm shift which I will describe in terms of the arrival of an “Age of Mass Connection”.

Within the context of this thesis, when I refer to “classical music” I simply refer to those works which are classified as such for the purposes of recording, broadcast, or concert listings. I acknowledge that there is considerable ontological debate in this area, and that the very idea of “classical music” is itself contested, but it is not the aim of this thesis to contribute to that argument. This thesis is concerned with records, broadcasts, and other such reproductions of music along with concerts, and the economics of the industry around them, rather than the nature of “classical music” itself. Likewise, “new music”, which for my purposes is to be considered a sub-set of “classical music”, refers to fresh compositions initially issued under (rather than re-arranged for) a “classical music” record (or broadcast, or concert) classification, and “composer” to the individual(s) credited with the creation of these compositions. Therefore, the *Air* from J. S. Bach’s 3rd Orchestral Suite, as recorded by Trevor Pinnock and The English Concert (Archiv, #423492) would be “classical music” herein, but Procul Harum’s *A Whiter Shade of Pale*, although it features Bach’s *Air*, would not. Similarly, and perhaps more contentiously, Katherine Jenkins’ various albums on the Universal Classics label would come under this definition of “classical music” – some of the tracks are traditional arias, but some are arrangements of popular or folk songs – but her recordings of contemporary pop songs, being rearrangements, would not count as “new music”. Objectionable as it may be to the purist, Jenkins’ records are clearly marketed as “classical music” and therefore must be considered to

be within the context of classical music alongside Bach, Brahms and Birtwistle in a thesis concerned with the present industry of classical music records and broadcasts.

My argument is ultimately concerned with composers of “new music” within the context of “classical music”, and in this respect I write from personal experience; the conclusions I draw are related to, and will have consequences for my work as a composer. I propose, therefore, a further refinement of my explanation of the term “new music”. It is necessary, but not sufficient, that the “new” music be contemporary; it must also come from the basis of newness itself, that is, the artist’s intention of a new contribution. While perhaps not the case for other composers, for my work at least, the intention of a “new contribution” implies a sense of progress. In the past, newness as the mark of progress was an ideological (even political) goal: the artist must take an extreme position in order to advance the art, (with reference to Schoenberg: “the middle road is the only one that does not lead to Rome”¹), “progress” describing the process of development from opposite extremes. However, an “extremist” in this sense need not be shocking or utterly disconnected with the past. Whether debating progress in the context of Stravinsky against Schoenberg², or the ennoblement of Elgar as “the first English progressivist” by Richard Strauss³, the idea of progress is deeply bound to the past, and the comparison of new work against the past is the essence of the dialectic of progress. Even radical artists such as Cage or Stockhausen could only be considered radical progressives in the context of what had gone before.

While some composers may perceive themselves as “progressivist” – synthesising ideas from the past to create new works, or trying to stand on the shoulders of giants (to paraphrase Newton’s words from an age of unashamed progress) – others may take an opposite stance, namely that giants are dead but fabulous beasts of the past, and that in the present “post-historical” time, the contemporary is equivalent to the new; and so the contrast is drawn between the burdensome terms “modernist” and “post-modernist”. I will return to this contrast at the close of

¹ Schoenberg: from the Foreword to the *Three Satires for Mixed Chorus*, op. 28, 1–3, and quoted in Adorno (2002 [1958]), 3.

² Adorno, (2002 [1958]), sets up his argument for progress by extremes by laying Stravinsky’s neoclassicism in stark contrast with Schoenberg. Despite his attacks on Stravinsky, the ideologies represented by both composers are necessary for Adorno’s concept of progress.

³ Strauss intended this as a compliment (to Elgar, at least, if not previous generations of English composers), after a German performance of *The Dream of Gerontius* in 1902 (Moore, 1999), 369.

Chapter III. Either way, the arguments in this thesis apply, both in the focus on the individual composer and the marketplace in which he finds himself.

The intention of these very specific definitions is to frame the discussion so that useful conclusions may be drawn about the current state of the art of composition within “classical music”, such as it exists today. However, many of the problems alleged to be facing classical music (discussed in the first two chapters), and the situation in which the composer finds himself today, are shared to differing extents by other musical traditions (such as jazz, electronica, avant-rock), particularly those not primarily concerned with producing mass-market commercially popular music.

The closing chapter of this thesis, then, is an examination of the economic situation of the composer in the context of the paradigm shift, considering first the individual, and then the “market” for new music as a whole. I conclude with a number of proposals for ways in which composers could succeed in the new Age.