

Economics of New Music

Tim Benjamin

File 1 of 7: Abstract, Table of Contents, and Introduction

File 2 of 7: Chapter I: Crisis!

File 3 of 7: Chapter II: ... What Crisis?

File 4 of 7: Chapter III: The Age of Mass Connection

File 5 of 7: Chapter IV: The Composer as Economic Agent

>> File 6 of 7: Chapter V: Conclusion

File 7 of 7: Bibliography

V. Conclusion

The very essence of the musical work-concept is a hotly debated subject. Whereas there have clearly been a number of identifiable musical traditions dating back to antiquity, the idea of a Western classical tradition, embodied by concert music, canonical works, and arguably by the work-concept itself, is a more recent phenomenon. The work-concept is analysed in depth by Lydia Goehr in *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works* (Goehr, 1992); this analysis is specific to what Goehr identifies as “classical music” (although she does not explicitly define the term), and therefore relates to the subject-matter of this thesis. For Goehr, the work-concept – or at least, the “regulative force” of the *Werktreue* ideal in the production of fine art – is a more recent construct than the more ancient tradition of “classical music” (*ibid.*, 176ff).

In the earliest Western musical traditions, music (debatably in the form of works) spread from performer to performer by oral means, supported and controlled in some cases by early developments in notation. As musical notation became formalised, works, (or at least, an identifiable and distinct musical tradition), spread wider and faster. The invention of the printing press (i.e., reliable mechanical copying) and its application to music accelerated this trend, along with the growth in speed and size of trade networks. This spread was not only geographical, but also intellectual: the existence of copies and distribution networks for those copies lent an accessibility to music and to the possibility of repeat performance that established a musical tradition, which finally emerged as the canonical tradition of which Goehr’s “regulative” work-concept is a defining embodiment. In this respect, the increasing fidelity and speed of copying and distribution may be held at least partially responsible for this change in, even the emancipation of (to speak in political terms) the musical world.

The invention of recorded sound has had a profound effect on the status of the work-concept, which had been relatively secure since, approximately, 1800. Indeed, some works (intentionally composed within the same “classical music” tradition) exist only as recorded or synthesised sound. Goehr devotes much of her text to analysis of the ontological nature of the work, and to contrasting the definitions proposed by other theorists (primarily but not exclusively Nelson Goodman and Jerrold Levinson). These work-definitions suffer in the face of objections concerned with electronic music and the efforts of experimental avant-gardists (the term “work” is itself often questionable in this context). For example, if one accepts an essentially Platonist view (Goehr examines that of Levinson, *ibid.*, 44–68), in which works are essentially implicit “discoveries” of the composer, and are not temporal constructions or creations, then how can such a view be reconciled with works comprised entirely of sounds that could not possibly have

existed before the invention of electronics, and which moreover intrinsically comprise certain media (such as magnetic tape) that are likewise clear examples of inventions? Goehr sets in opposition to Platonist concepts various nominalist theories; these, too, have problems and are challenged by works entirely dependent on new technology, but at least the possibility for a perfect performance (by a computer of a “score” in the form of a program) is consistent with the need for perfect compliance inherent in nominalist theories (Goehr raises an objection to Goodman’s nominalist theory based on the sorites problem, *ibid.*, 40–42)⁸².

The Internet and digital recording (and copying) reinforce these challenges to the ontological status of the work in a profound sense. I have argued above that the spread of an arguably contiguous Western classical music tradition (and the rise of the musical work-concept) were contingent upon inventions that facilitated copying and distribution. The rate of change in the musical tradition – the rise and fall of broadly identifiable movements (for example, the *stile antico*, or the move toward and away from tonality) – seems to correlate with the rate of change in connective (copying and distribution) technology. The rate of change is increasingly rapid over history, and I argue that this acceleration is a consequence of the increasing speed and reliability of distributive networks. The profound difference now (my “Age of Mass Connection”) is that there is no delay inherent in the distributive network, that the time taken for musical ideas to spread can be compressed to an instant. Social groups form from social networks on a highly transient and temporary basis and can grow (and disappear) very quickly; this process is driven by technological innovations (the World Wide Web), as is the ease with which individuals (before forming new groups) can locate material of interest (increasingly sophisticated search filters).

⁸² These theories bear a striking resemblance to the formal definitions of several modern computer programming languages (such as Java and C++). The relationship of a work to its antecedent types is, in my opinion as a composer and sometime computer programmer, more complex than that of software to its programming language, not least because of the possibility for (compliant) variations in performance. A performance from a notated score by humans, even of the simplest music, will always be unique, and even successive “performances” of tape-based music will change as the medium degrades over time. A computer program will however, by definition, always produce the same result (or to be more precise, an entirely predictable result). This may offer an explanation for the desire of composers involved with computer music to introduce chaotic elements into their programs, for example through software such as IRCAM’s “Max”, human-computer interaction, or through the sharing of (digital) materials in collaborative projects (which again challenge the provenance of the musical work as originating from the act of a particular composer at a specific time). Personally, I find the lack of possibility for compliant variation to be an insurmountable barrier to composing electronic or other “concrete” music, but alternatively I also find the dependence on unspecified variation to be an obstacle to active collaboration with other composers.

Culturally, the impact of these developments is reflected in the technology which drives them. The iPod (creating and storing personality) and even the Web (mediating social interaction) are examples of bodily extensions of symbolic constructs of the self, the first a child or mirror, and the second a nervous system, a repository for all the senses. The existence of these developments does not completely destroy or replace the cultural milieu of the past, but they represent simultaneously the ultimate destruction *and* construction of “aura” and “ritual”. The aura of the authentic or original – as identified by Walter Benjamin – is non-existent in this context, but it is replaced by a different sense of aura and ritual – fetish rather than worship – surrounding the creation of signs and bodily extensions. The aura and ritualised “worship” of the traditional producer-consumer relationship is destroyed, even more so than art was “emancipated” (as described by Benjamin) through the advent of film and photography as art forms. However, aura and ritual of a different kind have re-emerged as constructs through signs and extensions: the fetish cult of the constructed “individual” in an age of the masses.

These developments also prompt questions from the viewpoint of the composer. How real is this change (from that viewpoint), and how is the Age of Mass Connection different? What are the consequences, if any, for the work of the composer?

The main difference in this Age is that the marginal cost of supply of digital copies is essentially zero⁸³. This affects the composer both in the distribution of scores but also of recordings. In particular, the nature of recordings is very different in the new Age. The ease with which musicians can record their performances (sound as well as picture), and then share them with others via the Internet means that the composer’s work can spread more quickly and more informally than in the past. This informality is coupled with an odd coupling of permanence and transience. Once copied to the Internet, a digital file stands a high chance of being available (not least in Google’s cache) long after the first-published “original” file has been deleted, but the sheer quantity of material published every day means that interest in any one file waxes and wanes quickly, and any groups that form around that interest will be highly transient. The

⁸³ It would theoretically be possible – though impractical – to calculate a cost to society by dividing the running costs of the Internet’s infrastructure and all connected hardware by the number of digital copies made during the same period, assuming that the infrastructure does nothing other than make digital copies of data, which in a sense is indeed the case. Alternatively, a cost (again, to society as a whole) could theoretically be calculated on an environmental basis, based on the amount of carbon dioxide emitted as a consequence of energy consumed. Neither of these examples are the same as a cost to the producer, however, which at the marginal level (i.e., the cost of one additional copy) is zero.

permanence of the digital file, however, and the ease with which transient groups can form, means that very old files can unexpectedly generate interested groups long after their initial publication. Likewise, this permanence and easy availability means that over time, large numbers of people can encounter the same file, and the nature of online groups (disjointed in space and time) results in the frequent illusion of a concurrent audience and shared experience.

There are two principal consequences for the composer. Firstly, the composer cannot now truly exist outside of the rest of society as an artist-observer or cameraman. The composer in this new Age will produce an oeuvre that is itself a chain of signs constructing a musical personality, and the individual works in this oeuvre will exist (to a greater or lesser extent) in the myriad constructions of others. Individual compositions arise as forms of such chain-constructions, and they will live on as “works” (in the broad sense) as signs that were not constructed by the composer or society, but by the listener. One relatively trivial example of this phenomenon is in the adaptation of shared digital files by others, perhaps using an existing composition as the soundtrack to a short film or sequence of images. Digital files are easy to cut up and recycle in new forms, techniques which have been used by “classical” composers specialising in electronic music as much as artists in “hip hop” (and other similar forms). Indeed, the extent to which such sampling and splicing (the neological “mash-up”) is taking place renders categorisation as “classical” or “hip hop” almost entirely meaningless and pointless, as I have argued above (in Chapter III, “the need for broad categorisation dwindles...”). The very term “composer” is certainly no longer peculiar to an artist trained in the Western tradition, and perhaps now refers simply to anyone who manipulates sounds for artistic effect, analogous to the broad sense of the less-laden title “photographer”.

The second consequence for the composer is the economic effect of the new Age. The old models of the established “music industry” are being replaced by new approaches, as described in Chapter IV. If the composer can free his music from dependence on the old models for its existence and future reception, then the new paradigm of work propagation offers potentially great advantages, assuming that the composer’s aim is the spread of his music. Here I can offer a personal insight, and move on from my theoretical “Leverkühn” model.

My own work and my personal website offer a small example of the economics described in Chapter IV in practice. My compositions are available as under the Creative Commons license free of charge: in the context of the new “Age”, these are digital (PDF) downloads, and I have an online “tip jar” allowing for donations to be made. Mostly, people download the scores and do not pay, although I receive royalties from performances; anecdotally I believe people who have downloaded from me and have benefitted from my approach are more likely to report

their performances to rights societies, perhaps from a sense of the need to return or reward altruism. The most popular downloads are pieces for solo performance or for small, standard ensembles (such as the string quartet). My more complex recent works have been written for my ensemble Radius, and these – while not attracting great numbers of score downloads – have attracted a number of healthy donations. While not sufficient to provide an income (in Ives fashion, my **L** and **C** are quite distinct), I believe that taken as a whole, the relatively large number of free score downloads (running at about 900 per year) is more than compensated for by the smaller number of donations (a few thousand pounds per year) and performance royalties (a few hundred pounds per year), and that the average “income per score” must compete favourably with the income that would have been received, after disbursements to rights owners, through a traditional print publishing route for a composer at a similar stage of career.

An interesting component of the download traffic from my website concerns my few large-scale orchestral works. Although the scores are seldom downloaded, the recordings are by some way the most popular downloads. I can only speculate on the cause of this behaviour, but it may be that the large-scale works, while being “uneconomical” in the sense that few download the performance materials (even for free), and consequently few perform them, the rare performances (and essentially, the recordings of the performances, for the concert performances themselves are usually poorly attended, albeit by enthusiasts) drive people to download and perform the smaller works, and encourage people to make donations.

Of the works submitted alongside this thesis, the *Concerto for Trumpet and Orchestra* is an example of one of these large-scale works, which despite the thin recording of an amateur performance is the 5th most downloaded audio file. *Five Bagatelles* attracts donations; after professionally producing a CD, which did not sell well (perhaps in line with the expectations for CDs described in the early chapters), I offered the CD free of charge to donors (specifically, for “tips” of over £5), which had the effect of increasing donations higher than gross CD sales had been previously. This is of course merely a semantic change, but the new marketing approach and its success is in line with my theories of the economic effect of the new Age on music sales. *Strange Loop* is neither a popular audio or PDF download, but it appears frequently in the “long tail” of small-scale concert performances, as a consequence of the enthusiasm of the artists it was composed for. The score of *Three Portraits* has been downloaded relatively infrequently, perhaps because of the non-standard instrumentation, the shortness of the work, or its personal nature. *The Rosenhan Experiment* attracts a modest number of score downloads, and I have not yet made the recording available, but its performances have attracted great interest and some donations.

If new music can be freed from dependence on the old industrial models, and with the help of technology grapple with new economics and models of artistic communication, then the “Age of Mass Connection” offers the composer – and classical music – great opportunities for the future.

As composers and their product “new music” gain independence on the old industries, and with the help of new technology grapple with new economics and models of artistic communication, the “Age of Mass Connection” offers composers great opportunities. Likewise, to many established composers and in particular their industrial representatives, there are grave threats. In cultural and aesthetic terms, it remains to be seen whether the scope of the composer’s work will increase yet more, and whether a limit in the compression of action and reaction has now been reached. Further consequences for audience and composer (remembering they are now one and the same, intertwined as never before) will doubtless continue to emerge and evolve, but I believe that the current period will be viewed by future eyes and ears as one of profound change in the state of the art of new music.