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The Good, the Bad and the Lovely

by Ian Ritchie

This article is Ian Ritchie's keynote speech given at a Seminar of the Specialist Music Schools and Music Colleges, held in Edinburgh on 23 September 1994.

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Ian Ritchie, until recently General Director of Opera North, is Director of the newly founded Highland Festival and is a freelance advisor in the fields of arts development, programming and management. He was for some years manager of the Scottish Chamber orchestra and worked with many leading contemporary Scottish composers in a series of projects aimed at establishing a renewed relationship between the composer, the performer and the listener. The outstanding project to date, described in his article, is Peter Maxwell Davies's composition of ten concertos written for the ten principal players in the Scottish Chamber Orchestra - the Strathclyde Concertos.

What is the perfect model for a professional orchestra today? I shall paint an idealised picture of one. This orchestra is celebrating its centenary and its Music Director is an all-round musician particularly famous as a composer. Its audiences regularly fill the hall and expect to hear new music in every concert; however the orchestra also performs music from earlier generations, championed by the conductor, but most of its repertoire is new. In the city there are several publishing houses which are busier than ever, printing new music and editions of earlier works. The conductor was the driving force behind the building of a conservatoire to mark the centenary and where the players of the orchestra will teach the new generations of students who, in turn, will come to join the orchestra, filling the seats of their teachers and mentors when they come to retire. Thus a special sound quality is developed within a community of musicians and which will be handed down from generation to generation. The orchestra's musicians split up to play for opera as well as for concerts in their city and break down further into ensembles such as one giving regular performances of baroque music in a neighbouring church and others reaching audiences beyond their city boundaries.

Given the long strides which orchestras in Britain have taken into the fields of education and community work during the past dozen years and more recently into appointing composers "in residence" or "in association",

the orchestra which I have described could be the perfect role model for the most visionary of our institutions. But the year I am describing is not 2001, but 1843! The orchestra is the Leipzig Gewandhaus (which last year celebrated its 150th anniversary) and the music director was none other than Felix Mendelssohn !

So, where have we got to after all those years and what is the music profession actually changing towards? One must be very suspicious indeed of trying to fit a 150 year-old picture to today's landscape; only certain parts of it still fit and serve to remind us of what we should aim for. Society, economy and communications have all changed, for better or worse, since culture by its very nature cannot stand still. Global communications, which have become a naturally accepted part of contemporary life, certainly existed, albeit more slowly, in previous centuries. Performers travelled widely: for example, Archangelo Corelli was a baroque violinist of international repute, so much beloved of London audiences that a pub was named after him in the Strand; the pub has disappeared but Corelli is now remembered only for his series of *concerti grossi* and other instrumental pieces. Mozart, Paganini and Chopin are among many instrumentalists who were acclaimed in their day throughout Europe. They were composers because they needed to be: their performing talents depended upon their composition skills and *vice versa*.

Meanwhile, in Europe the patronage of royal families and the church played a major part in the wide-spread laying down of a common cultural top-soil over the traditionally rooted and locally based arts and crafts which have always grown through the best creative work - when you hear the Landler in symphonies by Haydn and Beethoven or the influence of folk music in the works of Dvorak, James MacMillan and many others, you will understand the point. Further afield, the mutual inspiration between the French impressionists and the Japanese printmakers was very important and there is no doubt that the richest or, rather, deepest cultures are those which are most open and thus informed by what they admit from elsewhere. However, today's global village has had a somewhat different impact, allowing all of us to choose to enjoy the arts of other countries and cultures without needing to absorb them into our own.



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We have increasingly tended to pigeon-hole our work. In music alone, the composers, conductors and instrumentalists have developed distinct careers; we now have specialist performers and listeners in the fields of early music, contemporary work, opera and so on, all separated out and marketed individually. Our education and funding systems are set up to support these specialisms: labelled for our convenience but also to our detriment, the sciences for instance are kept apart from the arts and the individual arts are encouraged separately from each other.

Back into the Middle Ages

In my view, we have almost completed a circular path through history which has led us out from the sixteenth Century renaissance, through subsequent decay and back into the middle-ages. Somebody learning to 'sing' in the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries would have been instructed in composition, word setting, instrumental playing and, incidentally, how to open his mouth and make a musical noise. In those days the visual arts, music, astronomy, mathematics and every other branch of knowledge moved forward together and into a new dimension. Medieval walled gardens became open rolling landscapes, flat looking portraits gained perspective and came to life, independent horizontal musical lines gained vertical harmonies: re-born through this process was the sense in every individual that the whole was greater than the sum of its parts.

In describing our current era as a throw-back to the middle-ages, I could be accused of some exaggeration; yet the danger signs are there to be seen and heard. What actually has been happening in the field of professional music-making? The panic resulting from falling audiences for concerts set in almost twenty years ago and the orchestras then decided that the solutions lay in marketing and that certain gurus would provide the answers. Danny Newman arrived and inspired us all with the idea of Dynamic Subscription Promotion in his book *Subscribe Now!*: countless organisations set up subscription series which helped to maximise audience numbers of those already positively disposed towards music and other arts. Others in North America subsequently invented excellent schemes

which enabled orchestras 'to reach' those who were undecided and convert them into being committed to listening to classical music. The new audience was led by a series of 'stepping stones' made up of particular events culminating in a performance in the concert hall itself.

But these brilliant ideas are like brilliant cures which treat illnesses and make us feel better. We need rather more: we must be concerned with the problem itself, which goes back much further and is deeply buried. After all, prevention is better than a cure and we need to find a long-term elimination of the root-cause. 'Marketing' is often considered a dirty word but, if viewed properly, is not really very different from 'education': the 'market' is a creative environment. If you have a vegetable market, you need a grower, a vendor and somebody to buy and eat the produce. The three-way relationships between them are inter-dependent. Most industries can survive in the long-run only if research and invention is central to their activity and would grind to a halt if reliant purely upon manufacturing and selling some thing which was designed for an earlier use. The music market should be just the same: the composer, the performer and the audience are all part of one dynamic triangular relationship. If the communication is right, each will inform and be affected by the other. People's needs, in the deepest sense, will be identified and performers will not simply seek to satisfy the apparent wishes of the public; anyway, it is the public's indifference which usually is most apparent.

Unchanging choice in repertoire

Sadly this three-way mutual relationship between the creator, the performer and the public has been mostly absent throughout most of the twentieth Century: a look at recent musical history will confirm that composers have, for the most part, inhabited ivory towers, the orchestras and opera companies have retained most of the characteristics of Victorian institutions and the public has largely stayed away. By the mid-1970s we had moved almost as far away as was possible from Mendelssohn's Leipzig of 1843. And that distance has been reinforced by the superficially unchanged appearance of today's orchestra and the unchanging choice in most of today's concert repertoire. To recapture now the spirit of Leipzig then must involve our performers in reflecting today's public in how they dress, in

where they congregate (if they congregate at all) and, above all, who they are.

During this century, the composer not only ceased to play a central part in the life of the community but also he or she ceased even to be central to the world of music, which had been allowed to forget the fact that without composers there was no music in the first place. Efforts made by the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, and subsequently by a number of other orchestras and opera companies around the country, to bring composers into contact with performers and audiences provide part of the solution. But it is education, at all levels and of all types, which ultimately gives the answer. The renaissance still eludes us, as artists, scientists and even games players are streamed apart from each other in schools and universities. But a curriculum in music which now admits equally the process of inventing, performing and understanding the art may yet produce a new generation of composers, performers and audiences with a mutual expectation of new work and a mutual desire to share it in public performances or through the electronic media.

School and further education must still ensure that the highest levels of technique and musicianship are acquired. But teacher and student must take a holistic view which embraces all the other arts as well as the various specialisms and branches within music itself. I believe that the relationship between the specialist baroque player and the traditional orchestral musician, for example, should be similar to that which exists between an ENT specialist and the general practitioner; our well-being requires that both shall work together. The process of composition should become a natural attribute and a new range of skills in communicating music must continue to be developed, as the definition of the audience continues to widen to embrace every section of the community. Some orchestras have been developing a considerable range of such activities, and a number of education establishments have already pioneered the development of students beyond their traditionally expected professional limits.

As composers become more involved with performers and as both together create deeper and broader relationships with the public, the nature of the profession itself inevitably undergoes change. The Scottish Chamber Orchestra's

Strathclyde Concerto project offers a good illustration. In 1988, Peter Maxwell Davies, the SCO's Associate Composer/ Conductor, embarked upon the composition of a series of ten concertos especially tailored to suit and to stretch the principal players in the Orchestra: the ninth and tenth concertos will conclude the series in 1995. By the following year, each one of these new works will have been published, broadcast, recorded and taken up by other soloists and orchestras throughout the world.

Significant in itself as a project, similar in some respects to the role played by Haydn and others as court composers in previous eras, Maxwell Davies' concertos went much further: they were the catalyst for unprecedented creativity and development in the lives of composers and orchestral musicians, catapulting them beyond the concert hall into the heart of the classroom and the local community. Each of the concertos has been adopted by a distinct educational Division of the Strathclyde region and a younger Scottish "composer-in-residence" has been engaged for each as a creative amateur to work alongside the teachers, the soloist for the concerto and other SCO musicians within the schools. These composers have created either distinct works involving the students and bands of musicians drawn from the community or else framework pieces into which the pupils have interpolated their own work. In the end the students, either individually or as groups, have produced their own music, based upon the Maxwell Davies's concerto and nurtured by the young composer in-residence, which may be assessed as part of their curricular work. Equally importantly, they have the chance to perform it as part of a celebratory event, involving the full SCO in a venue at the heart of their local community, a week or so before the Glasgow premiere of the *Strathclyde Concerto* itself.

The lives of most of the composers-in-residence, who have included James MacMillan and William Sweeney, have been transformed through this forging of direct links between their work, its performers and its audiences (both present and future). Incidentally, by the time each of the Maxwell Davies concertos is first performed, the hundreds of young people who have taken part in the related project have a wonderful creative insight into the new work: the Maxwell Davies is understood and applauded while the

classical symphonies which surround it pose problems for this new audience!

Other role models can be found within the past ten years, but the effects have been neither wide spread nor demonstrably permanent. The only way to ensure that the music profession has that "changing nature", which I have set out to describe, is for all currently involved in education and all future generations of artists to force these changes to happen. Perhaps 'force' is not the right word: they must be the instruments of the change.

There is nothing new in this. In the field of opera, composers great and small used to write specifically to reflect the talents and scope of their contemporary singers. The best works then simultaneously challenged and stretched both the singers and the composers. Sadly, almost all our vocal training today is geared to fitting and adapting our existing, originally different, voices to the same old music created for others.

Of course our living repertoire, sustained through publishing and recording, should continue to include the work of previous generations; this musical heritage remains alive by virtue of our prepared-ness to perform it. But these should be links within a continuous chain into the future and all our performers, instrumentalists and singers alike, must naturally play their part in fashioning it.

Very recently a major new opera was unveiled in San Francisco - Conrad Susa's *Dangerous Liaisons* - with a cast, including three world-famous soloists, booked and therefore involved before a single note was written. This should have been a successful recipe, an exciting challenge, a positive throw-back to the days which I was describing. However the composer, who had previously written many interesting pieces, wrote the music well within the compass and abilities of these accomplished artists instead of accepting and offering challenges to the status quo. The overall result was lukewarm and an all too rare opportunity to move the boundaries of opera was missed.

Therefore I urge all artists, and all those responsible for their training, to demand their profession to change and not merely react to how it is. Our future and that of our artform is in their hands.