

The Second Dilemma, or: Tape Music: The Poor Cousin

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has been added to the permanent "canon" of symphonic literature since Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* (1913). The response to new works since that time has ranged from total rejection to one performance somewhere followed by complete oblivion; however, the composer is not free to go back and write in an earlier style if he still wants to be treated as a creator of art music. Here, then, is the "agony" of "modern" music—the composer has the choice of writing innovative work in the certain knowledge that it will be discarded almost immediately or to write works in a traditional style (e.g., John Williams, Henry Mancini, movie and TV score composers generally) that will be dismissed as "not serious," "kitsch," "merely commercial," etc. Faced with this painful dilemma between forward and backward movement, some composers have tried sideways moves into exotic, non-Western musical cultures but such moves have generally be perceived as exactly that—tactical moves rather than the breaking of serious new artistic ground.

Art music has been marginalized since early in this century, and the situation you observe with respect to electroacoustic music is just the latest manifestation of this. Composers who view themselves as the heirs of the European art music tradition view this situation as an injustice; however, it is possible to view the history of 20th century music in a different light. If tunes, dance rhythm, and rich texture really are the essence of European art music, then it could be argued that the legitimate continuation of the European tradition is in American jazz and popular music and in certain types of rock—forms of music that all still deal in tunes, dance, and texture. By this interpretation, the en-

tire body of modern music from Schönberg (and the other atonalists) and later Stravinsky right up to today's electroacoustic composers is an aberration, which could not be expected to attract a large following.

You also bemoan the current musical taste of educated people. I think it can be shown that music as art (as opposed to business) has not been taken seriously among educated people in most of this century, unlike literature and the visual arts. This is not the 19th century, when the latest music was as likely to come up in serious conversation as the turbulent political and economic scene, the breathtaking scientific and engineering innovations of the day, etc. Today, you might be in for a ribbing if it became known that your favorite artists were "MOR" types like John Denver and Barry Manilow, but otherwise people will disregard your musical interests and turn the conversation to what citizens of the late 20th century think is really important.

Stuart Smith
Lowell, Massachusetts, USA

The Second Dilemma, or: Tape Music—the Poor Cousin

"Telle est la suggestion de l'acousmatique : nier l'instrument et le conditionnement culturel, mettre face a nous le sonore et son 'possible' musical." Pierre Schaeffer, *Traite des objets musicaux* (1966), p. 98.

Are we indeed failing to teach proper listening habits? Are composers backing away from Schaeffer's challenge to put instruments and other such culturally-conditioned crutches behind us, so our listeners

can "acousmatically" confront pure sound head-on? Or are the editor's "dilemmas" really more ideological than practical, carrying some implicit assumptions he is anxious for all listeners to share—as if there really should be only one way of hearing music? Let us suppose instead, for the sake of argument, that there are at least three. Many of us who actually do teach music for a livelihood have been brought up in the first way—patterned sounds are "music" for us only if they can also "say something" about, or become "images" of, living human experience. Even some musicologists have been known to loiter along this path—if what they hear can't be used somehow to connect them to the poems, postures, or power struggles of other people past or present, then it just "ain't got that swing."

Such preoccupations are not exclusively musical. As Rudolf Arnheim suggests in *The Dynamics of Architectural Form* (see chapter 4, pp. 162–199), "Life appears to us for the most part as an interaction between intended patterns and the impediments, variations, imperfections, imposed upon them because our world is not a machine shop run by totally infallible powers.[. . .] We may welcome this imperfection as an image of our own way of behaving by a variety of individual impulses, which we cherish because they document our freedom from mechanical replication." The second way of listening, we may imagine, is one that has beckoned seductively to music students for at least a millennium, perhaps even longer, since the days of Pythagoras—music as a realm of autonomous, yet totally controllable complexity, the "perfect embodiment of pure order." Here, even "real" time becomes just another metaphysical construct. Not surprisingly,

survivors of the first way (and their misguided pupils) would still tolerate, if not actually welcome, the sweaty grunts of human performers, while the adepts of the second way can hardly wait until the machine is perfected that will do away with such disturbances altogether.

Our absorption with today's computing devices, and the rise of software systems engineering—a job that many (including Ye Ed?) now find substantially more rewarding than either teaching or writing music could possibly be—may account for what appears to some observers as an emerging third way. Now, the program itself—its style, its power, the precision of its conceptual fields, the grammar and syntax of its underlying “language,” its “look and feel”—becomes, or supplants, the work of art as the locus of musical creativity (or, in the current jargon, musical “research”). The intricate software utilities we build (ostensibly for ourselves or our friends to make music with someday) are what is most prized, because of the vast possibilities for ordering and control they embody, rather than any actual compositions that may result from their use.

While ways two and three often appear “deeply intertwined,” there are probably a few third way types who still harbor subversive first way sentiments. But I doubt if many of them read *Computer Music Journal*. Some of us who do can perhaps be forgiven for wondering, as we peruse this latest issue with CRT-wearied eyes, whether our fascination with computer-controlled sound-ordering, as almost an end in itself, really needs to be more widely shared. Could we already be moving too fast toward “the standardization of everything for everybody, the favoring of basic physical function over expression

and of rationality at the expense of spontaneous invention”—all of which Arnheim sees as a temporary stylistic divagation, not a necessary way of approaching fundamental facts? And are we perhaps too quick to equate the enlivening presence of music with what comes out of our loudspeakers and *ordinateurs*?

Sterling Beckwith
York, Ontario, Canada

Fred Malouf remarked about some people perceiving his improvised music as “sounding written” and Larry Austin's review said that Stephen Pope's “Bat out of Hell,” an algorithmically-composed piece, “organically evolved like a good improviser.” These do not seem at all unrelated, for I perceive music which is well-written in a classical form to have the freshness and surprises of good improvisation, and that a master improvisationalist, when working from quality material, will sound as if the details had all been worked out in advance. The real criterion is the competency of the artist(s), and their compatibility with the listener. If the listener likes to see something happening, which may or may not be relevant to musical quality, then that listener will not like “tape pieces” (and probably not studio albums either, as they're often even more artificial). It may or may not help to have a collaborator in the form of a performer, but the facility to come up with an entire, complex piece of music by oneself is rare indeed.

This listener's experience in recent years is that performance pieces are not necessarily better than tape pieces, and often worse. The latter has been particularly obvious with MIDI pieces. Constraining a note to be described with difficulty beyond

amplitude (velocity) and frequency (key number) seems to have produced a generation of music where quantity of notes seems to be preferred over quality. Looking over any composer's shoulder about a decade ago, I'd see dozens of parameters controlling a single note, and some of those themselves representing envelopes. Sure, the cost is now down to where ordinary folks can afford real instruments, as is the complexity. But somehow, something seems to have been lost in the translation. This, plus the *Reader's Digest/USA Today* approach to computing makes me want to change occupations, or at least sub-fields.

I think there's a place for both tape-oriented pieces and performance-oriented pieces. I think it's the pieces that try to go half-way which can have problems. I've heard three different performances of Loren Rush's *A Little Traveling Music*, and the one which really shined involved an excellent improvisationalist. But until the system involving computer equipment can meaningfully respond to the performers, and proceed in a less preset format, the performers may need a different set of skills to make the music come alive. Tape music isn't dead music, any more than Beethoven is. We can snicker at the Marin County light bulb joke, but there is something to sharing an experience. Perhaps some people have to see something happening to be satisfied, or are so accustomed to seeing action from the mass media, that they can't stop and just listen for ten minutes. Maybe it's largely a matter of expectation.

Some of the best things I've heard are tape-based, and when we stop doing tape pieces, I will stop going to new music concerts.

Tovar
Palo Alto, California, USA

As for comments on tape music, I believe the analogy you make to visual media—film, theatre, and animation—is a good one. Semi-religious attitudes about the superiority of one art form over another are commonplace, but strongly individual. Personally, I feel impoverished in live performance exposure of any kind, and so I appreciate good instances when I can. On the other hand, even the performance of a symphony is not entirely spontaneous. There is a great deal of composition and rehearsal, so “live” does not mean “improvised.” Most of the ballet performances I have attended have been live performances to taped music, and the music is not at all incidental or background. Movies, which are entirely “taped,” began with live music back in the silent days. The response of a good audience still enhances my experience of a movie, so the relationship of performer to audience is not the only “live” factor. What can one say about a phenomenon like *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*? A movie like *Terminator 2* or *Song of the South* could never be imitated as a live performance. *The Simpsons* is certainly not second class television—or second class performance—even though the acting is done through a pencil. Clearly, I am of the “Let a thousand flowers bloom” persuasion.

As for absolute music or absolute listening, I think it is important for composers, and a good idea for audiences, to cultivate that option. I’m tempted to say it is essential for composers, but that seems too strong. Does that mean ignoring the modality? I think the richer choice is to embrace the modality, to consider it as part of the expression. Certainly as a composer one must grapple with one’s chosen means of presentation, not ignore it. As a listener, I can

choose to notice the medium or not, at my whim. Listening to one of the Caruso recordings, I can try to hear just the composer’s intent, or hear how Caruso interprets it, or how he sings so loudly, or how a megaphone recording process creates a distinctive sound, and so on. And at a concert, I can shut my eyes or not, admire the conductor’s technique or wince at the off-pitch horn playing, or enjoy the sounds of period instruments, or the reverberation of a large cathedral. As a practical matter, tape music offers fewer easy choices.

Just as silent movies were presented with live organists, tape music could be presented with visual accompaniment. That is a performance choice, one which a particular composer or a particular listener may not like. Some people see *Fantasia* as wonderful, others see it as desecration of the music. I think pure tape music is a good thing, and its appreciation should be encouraged. I also expect it will usually be less popular in concerts.

Ken Shoemake
Palo Alto, California, USA

Unfortunately, technological fads are nothing new. Music that uses the latest hardware, synthesis technique, or algorithm is frequently given extra attention, while pieces using older technology are ignored. This is a shame. It takes time to learn to use a new technology in a non-trivial manner. By the time a composer has mastered it, it is considered *passé*. Thus, a composer who falls prey to the desire to be doing the “latest-and-greatest” may never get his material under control.

Musical worth has nothing to do with whether a piece is for tape alone, for tape and instruments, or for computers interacting with performers. To be sure, each of

these media has its advantages, peculiarities, and pitfalls and these characteristics will influence the result to some degree. But a composer with something to say and a well-developed craft can do quality work in any of these areas. His voice transcends the medium.

I do take issue with the notion that the criteria to be used for judging a work are its “emotional honesty and passion as judged by a listener with closed eyes.” Leaving aside “emotional honesty and passion” (this could be a long discussion), “. . . with closed eyes” implies that visual elements are irrelevant to the meaning of the work of art. Where does this leave opera, the original (and still best) “multi-media” performance art form? To insist that eyes be closed is as absurd as insisting that tape music is invalid because there is no clown standing on a stage wiggling his fingers. Needless to say, if a visual element is present and that element is meaningless, closing one’s eyes is probably a good idea.

So let’s put the technology in the background and open our minds to the music!

David Jaffe
Palo Alto, California, USA

In response to the question put by you concerning the status of tape or prerecorded non-performance based music I would like to add the following two bits. Firstly, I think it would be a rather sad day for music and art if we as artists were to worry ourselves very much about comments such as those of Miller Puckette. While I have great respect for the work Miller has done over the years, and would like to hereby acknowledge the debt which I must owe to him for such visionary and far-reaching work in computer music, I would

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not worry very much if he is of the opinion that "tape" music is in some way deficient or not as "real" because of its lack of a live performer. This is just stuff and nonsense. I am the first to admit that I enjoy the excitement of live performance, provided that the music is "good." But the positive aspect of the presence of a "live" performer, need not negate any of the value of those works which do not include one. To think so, I must say, is just a very simplistic way of looking (and I do mean "looking," as in, at the performer!), at music. As many skilled and sensitive practitioners of the art of musical composition know (as do many skilled and sensitive listeners), the various parameters of music can be given more or less importance in different works, by different artists, dependent on context, necessity, and so on. This can mean the complete elimination of some of these parameters (performers, for example), when the others become important enough to stand by themselves. I'm talking, of course, of the case of "good" music. Bad tape music is just as boring as watching an overdressed acrobat playing the violin while standing on his/her head.

Prerecorded, non-performer-based music is "real" music because some of us composers and listeners say it is. We say it is because we believe it is. What is *music* really? What does it really *mean*? Since we must lack a definitive answer to these unanswerable questions, *music* must be, in all of its splendor when it is good, and in all of its horrible tiresomeness when it is bad, whatever the makers of *music* think it is. Now, the question of what is *good* and *bad* music; well that is like discussing religion and politics with one's relatives.

Richard Karpen
Seattle, Washington, USA

Picasso's *Guernica* is in black and white. Does this mean we should have special shows at museums of paintings which don't use color? Or showings of black-and-white reproductions of paintings that did? No, but it also doesn't mean that you can't make a good painting without it. Now substitute "music" for "painting," "live performance" for color, and your favorite tape piece *Guernica* . . .

Miller Puckette
Paris, France

Seeks Music for Cello and Electronics

For my final degree at the University of Vienna in collaboration with the Institute of Electroacoustic Music of Vienna under Prof. D. Kaufmann, I am preparing research on the theme of cello and electronics. All aspects of this subject should be researched, including pure tape compositions, cello and tape, cello and live electronics, etc. Please send information on compositions in this medium. Thank you for your assistance.

Michael Moser
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Curtis Roads Moves: Send Product Announcements to Paris

In October 1991 Consulting Editor Curtis Roads moved to Paris, France, to join the Pedagogy Department at the Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique (IRCAM). In addition to his pedagogical responsibilities at IRCAM, Roads will continue to manage the Products of Interest section of *Computer Music Journal*. Please forward all product announcements and reviews to the following address:

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The secretary in Pédagogie speaks English.

International Computer Music Conference 1992 in San Jose

The 1992 International Computer Music Conference will be held October 14–18 at San Jose State University in San Jose, California USA. The International Computer Music Conferences are presented under the guidelines of the International Computer Music Association presenting musical works, technical and scientific sessions and exhibits which demonstrate the entire breadth and variety of computer applications in music. Coinciding with the 500th anniversary of Columbus' voyage, the theme of the 1992 ICMC will be innovation and expansion and the keynote speaker for the conference will be computer music innovator and pioneer, Max Mathews. Pre-conference workshops on introduc-