Christopher Fox

Speaking clearly

Writing About Music 1985–2026



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Barbara Fox (geborene von Thadden), 1925–2026, gewidmet

Prelude

For many years the concert programmes in which my music appears have described me as 'a composer who sometimes writes about music'. This book is a collection of some of those 'sometimes'.

I began more or less by accident. I was asked to write programme notes for university concerts, then an article about avantgarde music for a student magazine, then a festival review for an experimental music journal, and I kept going because nobody else seemed to be writing about the music that interested me. Many of the articles collected here were written because I wanted more people to know about music that I found exciting. Once, in conversation with a composer who asked about an article I had written, I suggested that what I was doing was musicology. 'No', came the reply, 'it's just advocacy'. Maybe so, but I think there is often quite a sharp critical edge to the articles gathered here.

Quite early on I realised that writing about music made by other people was a good way of distilling ideas that might, or might not, inform my own music and, later, some of those thoughts found their way into the articles. Fortunately I worked with editors who seemed willing to publish articles that occasionally slipped away from their ostensible subject into something more self-reflective. I have carried on that tendency here, adding short commentaries at the end of each piece.

In almost all the articles in this volume I have made minor editorial revisions to the main text. Years of writing to strict word or character limits have taught me that the editorial process is indispensable: small may be beautiful but shorter is always clearer. In these revised versions the punctuation is improved, the circumlocutions removed, the obscurities made less so; in the two articles where the revisions are rather more extensive I explain this in the coda.

These writings owe their existence to many people, especially to those who commissioned them and those who made time to listen and comment on them as works in progress: Amanda Crawley, Anna Fox, Antony Bye, Benedict Schlepper-Connolly, Ben Fox, Bob Gilmore, Imogen Tilden, Jobina Tinnemans, Keith Potter, Malcolm Macdonald, Michael Finnissy, Nicholas Wroe, Patrick Becker, Rosemary Roberts, Susan McNally and Werner Uehlinger.

1. New Music and the Politics of Distribution

> Tweedledum looked round him with a satisfied smile. 'I don't suppose', he said, 'there'll be a tree left standing, for ever so far round, by the time we've finished!'
>
> Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*

This is an article about the crisis in new music today and, in particular, the difficulties composers and performers face in reaching an audience, difficulties reified in the institutions of new music. It will be argued by some that new music faces no problems more serious than constant threats to its funding. Certainly, in this country, advance publicity presents an impression of teeming life in the London new music scene, the Society for the Promotion of New Music receives ever more scores, regional audience figures for the Arts Council's Contemporary Music Network series continue to expand, the Huddersfield and Almeida festivals flourish; new music's garden is glorious and growing.

Yet anything more than a cursory glance at music's sister muses reveals a curious feature of contemporary life: whereas the communities of interest for new theatre, new literature, new film, new art overlap substantially, that for new music is essentially distinct. Anyone whose circle of acquaintances reaches beyond the confines of the world of new music will be familiar with the experience of conversations ranging widely over the latest books, films, paintings, plays but which, when they arrive at music, turn not to new 'classical' music but to rock or jazz. As Christian Wolff says, 'I have many friends to whom my music means nothing [...] *friends,* mind you [...] people with whom I in other respects communicate very well. That's ridiculous.'[1] New music is, therefore, not only elitist in the sense that all art-forms are elitist – elitist since they appeal only to a minority within society – but, more disturbingly, it is also elitist in having only a marginal appeal within even this minority. It is this marginalisation, its roots and its effects, that I want to address.

Of course, any scrutiny of the philosophy and practice of many of the composers who flourished during the Modern period soon suggests that, in many cases, elitism was something to be courted rather than feared. Nor was the retreat into the cultural margins something unique to musicians. Throughout this century there have been artists who, in the face of the philistinism of their intended audience, chose to continue their work in private, disseminating the results to a chosen

1 Christian Wolff, interviewed in Walter Zimmermann, *Desert Plants* (A.R.C. Publications, 1977), p. 271.

few. Indeed, it may be argued that a central tenet of Modernism practice was that, in quasi-scientific fashion, particular aesthetic 'parameters' could be abstracted, manipulated in the artist's workshop, and then returned into society, transformed within finished artworks. While this way of working was undoubtedly responsible for some of the great monuments of Modernism, it was also responsible for the growing estrangement between the avant-garde and the public, nowhere more significantly than in music – an estrangement acknowledged by the creation of elitist institutions such as the Darmstädter Ferienkurse of the 1950s.

In his essay 'German Music in the 1940s and 1950s' Hans Werner Henze writes of the post-war new music scene in Germany:

> Everything had to be stylized and made abstract: music regarded as a glass-bead game, a fossil of life. Discipline was the order of the day [...] [it] enabled form to come about: there were rules and parameters for everything [...] The audience, at whom our music was supposed to be directed, would be made up of experts. The public would be excused from attending our concerts; in other words our public would be the press and our protectors [...] On top of this we had to visualize the public as illiterate, and perhaps even hostile [...] At best one could approach the public with enigmas, without providing solutions. As Adorno decreed, the job of a composer was to write music that would repel, shock and be the vehicle for 'unmitigated cruelty'.[2]

If the public failed to respond favourably to this new music, the composer could be comforted by Adorno's assurance that 'if one does not understand something it is customary to project one's own inadequacy on the object, declaring it to be incomprehensible'.[3]

While these attitudes – so characteristic of what one might label 'High' Modernism – are no longer prevalent, their thoroughgoing rejection of any attempt to address a mass public has had catastrophic consequences for successive generations of composers, not only in its alienation of potential listeners but also in its erosion of composers' sense of a relationship with an audience. Amongst listeners, 'High' Modernism bred the assumption that new music was either totally incomprehensible or else comprehensible only to a highly educated elite; amongst composers the notion of either populism or popularity became suspect. By the time High Modernism was on the wane, ideas about how new music might communicate with an audience larger than the circle of its own apologists had become confused. The history of Late Modernism reveals a widespread uncertainty as to whether comprehensibility was a function of material, style, structure or idiom, with most composers experimenting with some or all of these elements in an attempt to rekindle public enthusiasm for their work.

The damage, however, had already been done, not only in the minds of composers and listeners but, just as significantly, in the creation of a network for the dissemination of the new music whose structures were conditioned by the demands of High Modernism. New music had been driven to the margins of our

2 Hans Werner Henze (trans. Peter Labanyi), *Music and Politics* (London: Faber & Faber, 1982), pp. 40–41

3 T.W. Adorno (trans S. & S. Weber, 'Arnold Schoenberg,' *Prisms* (Neville Spearman, 1967), p. 49.

culture and the result was that an institutional structure grew up which took this marginalisation as a given. If one examines the major organisations involved in promoting new music in Britain, for example, one discovers an assumption, often explicit and always implicit, that new music is unpopular and obscure.

The 'Nachtstudio' – the late-night programme to which radio stations have relegated new music – remains the primary vehicle for new music on BBC Radio 3. Having herded new music into its 'Music in Our Time' pen, the BBC then feels it necessary to spend a lot of time introducing it to its listeners, much more than it does for any other sort of music. The 'Music in Our Time' listener is expected to need lengthy preparation for this ordeal, presumably because this music is so difficult to understand. Sometimes works are even assessed – either positively or negatively – before the listener has yet had a chance to hear them. The consequence is that music is reduced to the status of an example within some academic hypothesis.

Another pernicious version of this donnish approach to the distribution of new music, and one which has migrated from broadcasting into the concert hall, is so-called 'thematic' programming. Here the scholarly apologia for the music consists of rather more than an extended introduction to a series of works; instead some grand scheme is devised whereby all the music in a concert, or series of concerts, can be said to illuminate some higher subject. This may be historical – a 'survey' of music before, after, or between particular dates – geographical – music written in a particular location – or personal – music by composers who studied with one another – but again, the tendency is for the music to be reduced to the status of evidence. This is not music as an interaction between performer and audience, but as an example of something that happened, somewhere else, some other time. As Robert Maycock recently observed of the music played in just such a series:

> The effect is like putting it on a pedestal [...] you were aware of a whole audience staring at it from perspectives formed, by the music that surrounded it rather than trying to grasp it exclusively in its own terms.[4]

This patronising approach does three lots of harm. For the listener, it stifles the lively, individual response to each work beneath the weight of a preconception imposed on a whole series of works. For the composer, it diminishes the integrity of their work for it to be placed in a contrived context in which emphasis is being thrown on just on of its (real or imagined) characteristics. For the performer, it is another step on the path of alienation that has continued throughout the Modern period: the performer is now expected to do no more than illustrate someone else's ideas about someone else's music.

Composers have undoubtedly contributed to this state of affairs, especially so in the period after 1950. Part of the legacy of 'Darmstadt' serialism was that it became accepted that for composers to establish themselves as 'serious' they

4 Robert Maycock, 'Intensity at a rare pitch', *The Independent* (London, Thursday 3 September 1987), p. 10