

New Music Versus Old?

Some Thoughts about Chamber Music

We chamber music lovers tend to be very conservative in our musical tastes. Speaking only of string quartets we have the amazing works by Haydn and Mozart in the 18th century, Beethoven bridging over to the 19th century to Mendelssohn, Schubert, Schumann, Brahms, Dvorak and many others. Then there are the great classics from the early to mid-20th century by Janacek, Bartok, Debussy, Ravel, and Shostakovich. And this compendium doesn't even venture in to the possibilities for various wind instruments, or mixed winds and strings, or trios, quartets and quintets with piano.

With such an embarrassment of riches why should we bother to listen to newly composed works? My answer to that question is because hearing new works and encouraging their composition is essential to the continued health of the chamber music genre. A continuous supply of new music is necessary for the sifting process that is constantly in motion. In the end new works must stand on their own merits and this can be daunting for composers. Consider this review from 1884 by a French musical journalist: "Brahms's quartets for strings are meaningless, impossible, and support no analysis... There is in this music a constant struggle among the instruments, an irritating and tiresome struggle; there is never a moment of rest for the spirit or for the fingers." Many other examples of harsh and even vicious criticism of composers we now consider the best of the best can be found in Nicolas Slonimsky's wonderful book *Lexicon of Musical Invective*.

It is rather curious that we live in a society and indeed a world in which we are constantly bombarded with the latest "new" thing, be it technology, fashion, popular music or diet fads, yet many classical music listeners seem to have an automatic aversion to anything written after 1970 (1930? 1950?). Many people assume that any music written within the last ten or twenty years will be dissonant and/or loud, which simply isn't always true. What is true is that we will never know unless we listen to new works, and listen with a somewhat open mind. In an ideal situation we would also listen more than once - did you really like coffee the first time you tasted it? The catch-22 for living composers is that without several performances a new piece cannot enter the repertoire, but getting even one public outing can be difficult.

My suggestion to all, both older and younger (in thirty-plus years of teaching at OSU I have found many student-age people to be quite close-minded on the subject of new music!), is to approach the opportunity for hearing new music with the same attitude that we embrace technology. Even if we are often frustrated by it, we know it is here to stay and we must deal with it at some level. We may even grow to like much of it. And as faithful listeners to KWAX classical radio will know "...all music was once new."

--Angela Carlson, August 28, 2013