

For the Birds

A futile Concept for teaching composition

by Walter Zimmermann

First of all, I like to thank the Rubin Academy for their invitation to this Symposium. I hope, it will bring us all a little more together. And I like to thank Alexander Goehr for his valuable words. I know his work since my youth when I subscribed to the journal "Melos," in which one could find several articles about his opera "Arden muss sterben." In the same issue, Hans G. Helms provoked the opera aesthetic of Bernd Alois Zimmermann, who replied in the next issue and so on. Those days New Music was full of brilliant minds, challenging each other. I was eighteen years young, curious and anxious to become a composer and wanted to study with Bernd Alois Zimmermann. But after his sudden death, I went on my own through the diverse landscapes of New Music and World Music. My book "Desert Plants, conversations with 23 american composers" became my treasury to learn from. So now after thirty years, I find myself teaching where I always had a resistance against the official curricula. Now I have to learn, how to emphasize the students original mind in a restrictive educational system.

Here I find the aspects of Alexander Goehr very helpful, when he speaks about how essential it is, to bring out the original quality of each student. Professor Goehr is also aware about the intrinsic difficulties, when he remarks, that too much knowledge can inhibit a young composer, especially, when a precocious young composer is bound to an ideological perspective, which is still very typical for the german way of teaching. The ingroup around the authoritarian teacher, we have enough of it. It leads the young soul to mimicry and not to freedom of it's creative expression. The handing down of tradition seems still too important to allow a careful growth of the young mind, following its complex singularity, rather than being exposed to a single minded idea.

The so called centers of New Music, like the summer courses in Darmstadt, became battle fields of the Avantgarde. We should keep in mind, that the term 'Avantgarde' is borrowed from military language. As soon as you enter these institutions, you have to obey the aesthetic demands. Only then, it seems the channels of possibilities open, but the trap is that the pieces composed within such a situation reflect more the specific language of the institution than the originality of the single composer. Very few have the courage to break out of this sectarianism.

Alexander Goehr is absolutely right, when he describes the outcome of such composers life as a psychological disaster, "a betrayal of what teaching is meant to be about."

Talent is so precious and fragile and has to be protected in hostile environment. There the teachers role is challenged to provide a "locus amoenus" within the campus. The campus is a highly regulated field, where rough reality strikes, whereas the "locus amoenus" is a protected shady place, where an atmosphere of freedom can be sensed and developed.

I try in the following to develop such an alternative approach to teaching which could open the single minded authoritarian road to a broader branched landscape of paths, to allow the student more criss cross for the search of his individual expression. In such an ideal situation, it could happen oftener, that, how Alexander Goehr pointed out: "A really gifted composer proceeds like a sleep-walker." The teacher then could develop in a more adequate way a constantly changing ambience of choices. But I am afraid our reality is to far away from such ideals.

Creating a contemporary orientation for composition training is a fundamental challenge. If we were to compare the education of a composer with that of a visual artist, we would have to admit that training in art schools is much freer, and deals more directly with creativity.

What are the reasons for this difference in attitude? One of the reasons is surely the fundamental difference between the two media. The directly visible

material proves sufficient for an artist's realization of his work, for an expression of his "self". But a composer is dependent on the transformation of his music through performers, indeed the music only then begins to exist, unless of course one is satisfied by experiencing the music merely as a written art form. Because music schools are established primarily for the purpose of training musicians and music teachers, the emphatic historical orientation or the curriculum is hardly surprising. In a century in which ninety-nine percent of our performed "serious" music stems from our cultural heritage from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, naturally our technical studies and textbooks must also reflect this repertoire. But to allow the remaining one percent, which should reflect contemporary creativity, to be determined by the curriculum of the musicians being trained, seems increasingly, questionable to me. Mediating fundamental historical knowledge is certainly important, but when this becomes our only criteria, or the only standard by which all music is judged, then we create an imbalance regarding the achievements of twentieth-century music. Separating the education of the composer from the all to historically trained musicians would perhaps be a realistic step. However, it is still too radical, and also somewhat senseless, since the collaboration between musicians and composers remains essential. We must first develop textbooks and studies, so musicians can learn appropriate idiomatic techniques for interpreting new music. But as long as an adequate number of these materials and courses fail to exist, then the collaboration between composers and musicians remains more important than ever.

We must also work against a merely historical education: we must expand our emphasis from a purely historical to a geographical perspective. The most important forms of polyphonic development in European music tropes, melismas, sequences, antiphony, accompanied variations, and various figurations also exist in non-Western music. There are similarities between hoquet techniques of Machaut and vocal styles of the Bushmen. Or, similarities between the contrapuntal techniques of the mbira ("thumb-piano") and simple, three-part writing (with and without a cantus firmus). Shima Arom in Paris has an institute devoted to the study of african polyphony. Soon his studies could be part of the curriculum for devoted composers, who try to learn from the intrinsic qualities without exploiting it.

We must expand our historical view in this way, in order to put our Eurocentric view into perspective. Because I have undertaken many excursions into other cultures, and have allowed themes of the connection between the historical and the geographical to enter my music, I would like to absorb this topic more deeply with composition students. Jazz, rock and techno also wait to be explored and related. A model for this is the conservatory of Den Haag, where I was teaching, as well as Rotterdam, with it's world music dept, or Wesleyan University, Connecticut.

For years now the conservatory of Den Haag has been working in an interdisciplinary way. Alongside their outstanding baroque department, they offer an education in jazz and world-music. Some of this music is surely to influence composition training, if only to serve as a reminder that we all are more or less strangers in the world. Or, by including different styles, one begins to ask how one can integrate or assimilate these styles into the personal expression of the composer. Because the composer is just a single individual, he can first work through an abundance of various styles to an unmistakable point of view, rather than clinging to one tradition.

This is, in fact, the most difficult part of teaching composition, because one must conquer much resistance in order to free the student from his habits, whether or not they are the result of education or other areas of influence, and one must then lead him to a personal, unmistakable expression of his "self," his own personal drama. Once this has been achieved, even if realized only internally by either the teacher or the student, only then is detachment from models found, and one can begin learning new techniques, techniques that are tailored to the personal world of the student, and drawn from the acoustic research of Sonology, Utrecht, etc.... Discussion of the basics of sound is of elementary importance, because it is here that often the unconscious adjustments begin to surface. It is important to provide the student with a clear idea of how a piece is a actually predetermined based on its instrumentation, or how one could

achieve either a subtle refinement of instrumentation, or to allow it to split sounds into antagonistic stratas or to relate opposing elements from contrasting traditions, and so on. The most important thing is a detailed knowledge of the acoustic and stylistic parameters of instruments and their combinations to more abstracted sound bodies. "One does not find free vibrating air just anyplace," said Harry Partch.

The next step, the organization of harmonic and rhythmic materials, or the mutual impact of these two parameters (harmonic rhythm, pitch proportions), will mediate fundamental knowledge concerning the similarities between European and non-western traditions. Of great significance is knowledge of both Pythagorean theories (Plato, Neoplatonism, etc.), as well as theories of Chinese, Indian, and other systems of pitch organization. The rhythmic component if mediated less through written traditions is rather often derived from either transcribed sound recordings or from numerical formulae of inherent rhythms as in Messiaen or Xenakis.

We also must dedicate much attention to the opposing elements of spontaneity and construction in composition. The question arises, whether or not one should favor diary-like composing (keeping notes, or sketchbooks), or conceiving of the work from the start as a complete architectural object. The interdependence of both creative processes is of utter importance as it was in baroque philosophy between Epigenesis and Evolutio.

Discussions of extreme stylistic characteristics of current opposing composition techniques (for example: Ferneyhough versus Feldman) remain inevitable. In this manner, the entire panorama of twentieth-century music, especially that from the second half of the century, can be included in analysis, always with the awareness of its stylistic relativity, without clinging to dogma. One could also choose various unified course topics per trimester, for which also the students would pull together material, following their individual pathways. The results of such efforts should be published and presented regularly in public performance. All of this requires positive collaboration and organizational talent between students of composition, musicology and interested musicians. These goals could be more easily achieved, if the instrumental classes made twentieth-century music a part of their curriculum. Or, better yet, a chamber music course devoted entirely to twentieth-century music.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize that I am pleading that composition training be developed into an independent professional education, independent of a single minded tradition; but this task still remains ahead of us. And please don't forget this anecdote: While Beethoven lived in Bonn, some of his music was performed in a concert program together with music of deceased composers. In response, a critic wrote (quasi): "Indeed, it was quite nice...but it shouldn't happen again!" It happened again and again. Today it became a habit. Ninety-nine percent of our musical life is dominated by music of the past. To teach independence from these habits could be the never ending task for the remaining one percent, if our work will not be "For the Birds".