

Symposiums: A Shaping Force in American Music



by Lothar Klein

■ Probably no other period in music history has suffered more strained relations between composer and public than our mid-twentieth century. While it is often pointed out that more music is being published, recorded, played and listened to than ever before, statistics are of little comfort to the young, serious composer whose work is not given a hearing. A cursory glance at the programming policies of major and minor league orchestras reveals the plight of new music. Orchestral music making, we are always told, is an expensive affair. The romantic symphony and concerto—those most personal utterances—have become box office commodities. The drawing power of Rachmaninoff, plus a top flight soloist whose single performance fee usually equals an orchestra player's yearly income, packs the

hall and fills the coffers. It cannot be denied that such financial coups can provide extra rehearsal time for new music but, surely, a strange state of affairs does exist.

What Is This "New Music"?

The very phrase "new music" seems inept and historically facetious. It is difficult to imagine the Renaissance man, with whom our age so often seeks affinity, speaking of "new" or modern music. Are we really so different? Is our century so special that our composers must be regarded as a breed apart?

Our orchestras and music schools have been called "museums for the preservation of old music," and the young American composer must grapple with a musical world in which he may grow old prematurely. Our newly constructed performing centers (which somehow invite comparison with chandelier-

lit subways) seem destined for more performances of Beethoven, Tchaikovsky and Brahms. Though the serious musician may be a little less than intrigued by an oncoming performance of the Mendelssohn violin concerto, no one suggests that the standard repertoire be abandoned. The economics of the American music business, however, confront our composers with a situation that composers of other countries are spared. European national radio stations, with their array of fine orchestras, take care of their own composers while, in Russia, if a composer writes the "acceptable" type of music he need not fear neglect. But what of the American composer? He, obviously, writes unacceptable music. If not, why is it so difficult for him to secure a hearing? The stock answer, "His music is too difficult," evades the issue. Even if his music is relatively undemanding its chances for

professional performances are slim. The box-office commands; it calls the tune and dictates the established aesthetic. Is this indicative of an alive, free musical culture?

This is the situation facing America's young composers. Though our society provides equal opportunities for folk singers and for do-it-yourself composers à la Cage, those not caught up in these sociological vagaries have little chance of being heard. They are shunted into that "no man's land" which mutely considers their efforts too aristocratic for consumption by a democratic culture. T. S. Eliot, in his *Definition of Culture*, expresses the belief that "no true democracy can maintain itself unless it contains different levels of culture." If we agree with Mr. Eliot, we must admit injustices exist in our otherwise active musical world. From the collision of popular taste and the exigencies of the music business, the role of university music departments has emerged.

A decade ago the university environment was regarded as unhealthy for the creative individual. Today, however, only universities have remained relatively free of the choking complexities of the music business. Their role may well be similar to that of universities in the Middle Ages which afforded scholars an environment conducive to free thought. Specifically speaking, it may be the Symposia for new music sponsored by various colleges and universities throughout the country which will be the most vital core of today's music scene.

Symposium Opens New Vistas

The Inter-American Symposium for Contemporary Music held annually at The University of Texas is representative of a development reflecting the vicissitudes of America's recent musical life. In its efforts to alleviate some of the composers' performance plights, the Symposium's twofold purpose has been to give experienced, as well as student composers, a chance to hear their works and to provide instrumentalists with ensemble experience playing new music. Basically the Symposium's operating procedure is fairly simple. Scores are solicited from either music departments or private individuals and

selected for performance by a faculty committee. Chamber music for all combinations and orchestral music are equally acceptable. During the selection process, compositional sectarianism is carefully avoided and attention is given to presenting as great a variety of styles as possible. The Symposium proper usually lasts one week and concerts involve all departmental performing organizations.



The ideal conditions for an artist or musician will never be found outside the ideal society, and when shall we see that? But I think I can tell you some of the things that any artist demands from any society. He demands that his art shall be accepted as an essential part of human activity and human expression; and that he shall be accepted as a genuine practitioner of that art and consequently of value to the community.

—BENJAMIN BRITTEN. *Remarks on Winning the First Aspen Award, July 31, 1964.*



One of the Symposium's primary features has been the presence of well-known composers, conductors, and performers. Visiting composers have included Howard Hanson, Wallingford Riegger, Paul Creston, Vincent Persichetti, Halsey Stevens, and Aaron Copland. Conductors who have led the university orchestra are Frederick Fennell (associate conductor, Minneapolis Symphony), Guy Fraser Harrison, Victor Alessandro, and Donald Johanos of the Oklahoma City, San Antonio, and Dallas Symphonies respectively. During the 1963 Symposium, Aaron Copland appeared as guest composer and conductor with the San Antonio Symphony. Such projects are underwritten by grants from The University's Excellence Fund supplemented by regular departmental funds and private endowment. Thus, the Inter-American Symposium has done what no professional organization has been able to do. Since its inception thirteen years ago, the Symposium has performed over 600 new works by more than 250 composers from throughout the Western Hemisphere and Europe. If

such figures are suggestive of production line quotas, it can be pointed out that a substantial number of works first performed at Symposium concerts have since been repeated by the National, Cleveland, Minneapolis, Dallas, Oklahoma City, and San Antonio orchestras. Performance awards and cash commissions have been made by regional, civic, and professional orchestras to composers whose works have been first heard on Symposium programs.

Because of the University's proximity to Mexico, Symposiums have always engaged in musical exchange with Latin-America. While such activities have been limited to an exchange of scores, plans are underway for an exchange of student performers between the National University of Mexico and the University of Texas. Though the event was originally named *Southwestern Symposium for Contemporary Music*, composers from many Latin-American countries have been heard on Symposium programs. As a result of an ever widening scope of activities, the Symposium was renamed. Undoubtedly, the Inter-American Symposium's most ambitious and adventurous project to date took place during its programs last March. Luis Herrera de la Fuente, conductor of the National Symphony of Mexico, was engaged as guest conductor. In addition to the usual readings of new orchestral works, a program of recent music by prominent Mexican, Canadian and Polish composers was presented. Among the works heard were Rodolpho Halffter (Mexico) *Tripartita*, Harry Somers (Canada) *Lyric*, John Weinzweig (Canada) *Divertimento*, and Witold Lutoslawski (Poland) *Musique Funèbre*. The Lutoslawski piece received its second American performance, its premiere having taken place a week before by the New York Philharmonic. Maestro Herrera de la Fuente also conducted the second American performance of the prelude from his opera *Cuauhtemoc*. Chamber music productions included a staged performance of Hindemith's *Hin und Zurück* by the University's Opera Workshop and the American premiere of Kurt Weill's *Frauentanz*.

To complete the Symposium's international make-up, the German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen appeared in a guest lecture series.

The Symposium in Retrospect

If these activities seem Utopian, be assured they are not. The Symposium occurs but once a year. Preparations begin months in advance, and the wake of each Symposium precipitates many questions typical of symposium activities anywhere. Players chide composers for unidiomatic writing, composers complain of instrumentalists' inability to cope with new technical problems, conservatives debate progressives and blasé discussions pass judgment on why Schoenberg is old-fashioned and only true blue serialism will do. Two days later, studies go on as formerly. Violinists practice Wieniawski, musicologists again carry heavy, scholarly tomes and composers once more seriously unravel the mysteries of the Neapolitan sixth chord. Has anyone learned anything? Most emphatically—yes.

Composers and performers alike may learn their most immediate lessons by acknowledging some truth in each other's fault finding. Inexperienced composers will also, to their horror, discover that the amount of rehearsal time allotted their work in a university reading session is not more than the time allowed by professional groups. Keen observers will note that dictates of historical perspective have plunged many young composers (perhaps without their realizing it) into a new common-practice period. It also becomes apparent, regardless of one's familiarity with musical thought of the past fifteen years, that music is undergoing greater changes today than it has during the last three hundred and fifty years. Our most trusted concepts, our firmest beliefs are being scrutinized; some have already passed revision. In studying scores submitted for Symposium performance, one is struck by the fact that it makes little difference if composers are working in Maine, Mexico, or Montana, for their compositional birthrights all pay allegiance to those Meccas of European serialism, Darmstadt or Cologne. This leveling of musical style, enabling



Symposium committee member and author of this article, Lothar Klein (left), discusses a fine point with Karlheinz Stockhausen, noted German composer (center). Looking on are Luis Herrera de la Fuente, conductor, National Symphony of Mexico (right), and J. Clifton Williams, University of Texas, chairman of the symposium.

young composers to jump from second rate imitation Stravinsky or Prokofiev to the latest avant-garde methods is a curious phenomenon requiring laboratory study which only a Symposium can provide. Also, bearing in mind that for one reason or another one isolated orchestra may show preference for avant-garde scores over the more conventional, a Symposium again becomes the only occasion when one may assess an over-all image of present day compositional tendencies. This is precisely the reason why a Symposium must be kept free of musical partisanship. Perhaps the greatest danger facing a Symposium is that it may foster a certain type of festival music which can survive only in an ivory tower situation. Luckily, this pitfall exists for the traditionalist and the avant-garde alike.

Growing Status and Impact

In practice, however, Symposiums are losing their ivory tower status. With lines of communication between composer and professional orchestras jammed, it is the commercial symphony orchestra which is rapidly becoming an institution for the preservation of old music. With few exceptions, the majority of American orchestras

have not grown in capacity to be representative of our creative scene. Practical reasons (are there ever any other?) are always cited for this state of affairs. If the reasons are indeed practical, one can only hope that a day will come when a practical solution will be found. The fact that there are approximately 1,000 symphony orchestras in the United States today seems to indicate that interest in music is at an all time high. Of course, it would be impossible to arrive at such a scale of music making without the support of a musically-aware public. Financial contributions from individuals and foundations and the all important emergence of community orchestras are creating a Golden Age of music making. There is, however, a definite lag between the amount of music being written and what is performed. Civic orchestras generally duplicate the repertoire played by professional orchestras and new music must still go begging. If we are striving for a true musical Golden Age, we should remind ourselves that the past Golden Ages of the madrigal, symphony and string quartet, *did not* take place fifty years after the music had been written.

Despite financial affluence and

today's soaring interest in music, lopsided conditions still exist which make the young American composer a second class musical citizen. While one community orchestra can afford to pay its conductor \$18,000 for a six concert season, one professional orchestra has not performed a twentieth century masterpiece like Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* during the last ten years because of a "conservative public" (or conductor?). What then is the composer to do? The often prescribed remedy, "Write for a community orchestra," is at best only partially effective. Community orchestras may be limited in their technical capabilities. If a composer writes in a traditionally inspired idiom and minds his orchestral manners, a performance by a civic orchestra is usually not too hard to come by. But what of the composer who writes more demanding music? To simply advise a change of style seems tantamount to warning him to conform and survive—certainly a rather undemocratic ultimatum. Furthermore, such a dictate has little place in the arts. Nevertheless, here we have the basic confrontation between the individual composer and the dictates of our mass musical society—that impersonal culture machine. Thus, our culture confronts us with a problem already recognized by the Greeks—a tyranny of the majority.

If there is one thing democracy must grant its artists, it is the right to be themselves, the right to maintain their stylistic personalities, the right to balk at simply feeding the established culture machine. This

is basic because in a society that defines its democracy by the respect and rights accorded minorities, the individual is all important. The musician, acting as an individual, has several choices. He may either forget his status as an individual and seek to supply the demands of his mass culture by writing music for super market consumption, or he may regard music as a medium capable of heightening an individual expression. (Should he despair at the possibility of communicating with a public altogether, deciding to write only for himself, he might heed Kierkegaard's admonition "it is dangerous to isolate oneself too much from the bonds of society.") Although most of us probably prefer this latter, more personal function of music, we cannot censure the composer of super market music on grounds of its inferior musical value. Regardless of our evaluation, super market music is, quite literally, a legitimate type of *gebrauchsmusik*; it fills, or seems to fill, a useful purpose and a musical need for millions. It could even be argued that writers of television commercials are our Verdi's. If these prospects horrify us, they should. Within the operations of the culture machine, a radio jingle has greater value than a new string quartet. Our only salvation is that as listeners, we too have choices: we can either listen as a majority, forgetting our discriminatory responsibilities, or we can listen as individuals who are convinced of music's importance and fully aware that our abilities can become ever more perceptive. The situation is

simple. Either we care for the efforts of the individual composer within our mass culture, or we do not.

The Symposium Is One Solution

There is only one question left to be considered. With all these difficulties facing the young composer, where can he get his music performed?

It would seem from all this that universities must take the initiative. Through efforts—like Symposiums—the life and growth of our creative musical culture can be sustained. Within time, perhaps, Symposiums throughout the country will band together, forming a potent, influential, and new performance force in our musical life. Symposiums, naturally, pose a confrontation, a conflict between old and new, and we must not forget that conflict signifies life. Symposiums should mean contact with our century. Regardless of styles presented, we must not forget the work and perhaps even the hope which each work may hold for its composer and for us as well. Each work should appeal to our sincerest judgments. If it is music of protest, it may be against the world of which we are a part. Whatever our attitude towards new music may be, let us not be afraid of being part of our century by refusing to take an adventure of the spirit.

The author is assistant professor of theory and composition at The University of Texas, Austin. His Orchestral Epitaphs (for Hemingway, Camus, and John F. Kennedy) were recently premiered by the North German Radio Orchestra, Hamburg, and will be repeated in France and Italy.

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