



KLANGZEITORT

## Tom Schnauber: THE NACHOS OF MUSIC

My uncle Ken was richer than God. He achieved his wealth through work in the financial sector and spent most of his life among the echelons of the 1%. As is so often the case in the United States, his capital afforded him perks not entirely related to his profession or even to his strengths as an individual. For instance, he spent a few years on the board of the Music Center in Los Angeles, the entity that oversees, among others, the activities of that city's symphony orchestra. During the time he held that seat, I was a young composer studying at the University of Southern California, and he and I would occasionally have conversations about music. At one point, he said to me, "You know, Tom, the Music Center sometimes commissions new pieces of music, and every time that happens, those of us on the Board have to go to a concert and listen to the orchestra play these things that we paid these composers to write. You study this stuff, so tell me: why is modern music so unpleasant? Why can't these guys write something nice that people actually want to hear?"

This interaction highlights a problematic feature in the state of contemporary concert music in the U.S. Since government support for composers (and artists in general) is nominal, most of the money for the work we do comes from private donors, either directly or through boards and organizations. The current state of wealth distribution in this country being what it is, most of those donors end up being rich, elderly people, many of whom get confused if the music they commission doesn't sound like Mozart. Moreover, that segment of the population is dying, and their heirs usually have no connection to the idea of supporting "Classical" music at all, let alone new concert music. This, plus dwindling ticket sales all around, has resulted in some bizarre yet very telling efforts, even among well-established ensembles. For instance, the Los Angeles Philharmonic markets its conductors like Hollywood

superstars, with flying-hair billboards and TV ad buys; and the Seattle Symphony recently teamed up with Sir Mix-A-Lot to perform an orchestral arrangement of "Baby Got Back" on an outreach program. If that much contortion is required to sell the concept of a symphony orchestra in general, imagine what it takes to convince people to hear such an orchestra play a piece of new music.

In fact, many composers of my generation were told by their teachers to stick to the "8-to-10-Minute Rule" when it came to orchestral music: If you write a piece for orchestra that you actually want performed, it should be no longer than 8 to 10 minutes. Since large ensembles that specialize in new music, such as the Louisville Orchestra or the American Composers Orchestra, are very rare, the pieces we write will usually be competing for air time with the older Bach-to-Brahms standards that audiences prefer. Most concerts that have new music feature only one such work and usually sandwich it between two popular older works, basically so the audience won't show up late or leave early to avoid hearing it. Because orchestras have a limited amount of rehearsal time, they will naturally concentrate on the bulk of the program that consists of the older music, meaning they will devote as little time as possible to the new piece. So works that are 8-10 minutes long are the most attractive since they require the least effort to put together. Contemporary compositions are like nacho chips at a Mexican restaurant: as long as they don't cost much to serve, we might as well eat them; but just a few, so they don't spoil the actual meal.

How did things get this way? Why is it that we who are in the direct creative lineage of figures central to Western cultures in the past have become so marginalized? Much of it has to do with the

music, but that was a world far removed from that of instrumental concert music.) So why not play the models themselves rather than their imitators?

Only at the beginning of the 20th century did truly innovative creators of instrumental music begin to emerge from the American landscape. Charles Ives and Carl Ruggles led the pack, followed soon after by edge-cutters like Henry Cowell and Ruth Crawford Seeger. The U.S. leapt to the forefront of the avant-garde, producing composers who ran the gamut from hardcore atonalists like Elliott Carter, to neo-Romantic pan-diatonists like William Schuman, to uncategorizable experimentalists like Harry Partch.

But they had competition. At the same time that writers of concert music were coming into their own, an entirely new, uniquely American music burst on to the scene. It started with a handful of black musicians in New Orleans melding African, European, and Caribbean musical habits that had survived in fraught coexistence for the past century in North America. Jazz caught like wildfire, helped in no small part by the country's burgeoning recording industry. The first Jazz record was released in 1917, and, in less than ten years, the genre held such a central part in American culture that it literally defined an entire decade. Not too long after that, a wholly new form of audio-visual entertainment arose that quickly supplanted opera—a European invention as well—as the main multimedia entertainment for Americans, and also led to another new genre of music: the movie soundtrack. Jazz quickly diversified into a multitude of regional and ethnic styles that served as the sonic reflection of various national characters. The economics of the recording industry became a driving force in the support and creation of new popular

history of this country and the role that certain types of music have played in it, both of which are significantly different than that of European nations. For one thing, Europe had a long and vibrant tradition of support for the arts by both the church and the ruling aristocracies. These institutions valued music as an indispensable part of their identity; creating new music was central to the character of a living, breathing political or religious entity. That tradition is still carried over in most European countries in the form of substantial government support for the arts; new art is generally recognized as occupying an important place in a long and vibrant historical timeline. The United States, on the other hand, has no such tradition. There has never been a ruling aristocracy, and the religious institutions here were essentially founded on sparseness.

Of course, that didn't mean there was no place for concert music at all; quite the contrary. Starting in the mid-1800s, symphony orchestras sprang up all over the country. But they were recognized as a purely European construct, albeit one which was to be emulated. Many of these ensembles were founded by immigrants from Europe and their repertoire centered on European music. Until the early 20th century, new works by continental composers were more commonly heard than new works from the soil on which the orchestras performed. Some of that might have had to do with the fact that, up to that point, American orchestral music consisted primarily of homegrown Euro-imitations. Artists like Arthur Foote and Edward MacDowell, while certainly skilled, were basically the Pennsylvania Dutch version of German Romantics. Aside from a few outliers, such as the short-lived and dubiously named "American Indianist" movement, orchestral composers in the U.S. looked to Europe for models. (There was plenty of inventiveness occurring in the area of sacred choral

music, including Rock'n'Roll. At the same time, the film studios became inventive giants with bottomless resources to pay artists very well for their work, thereby attracting many composers who otherwise would probably have concentrated on concert music.

All of these innovations were experienced as singularly New World phenomena. So in the American consciousness of the past century, "new music" has meant not so much a linear development from older styles, but rather an explosive emergence of the unprecedented. Concert/art music, no matter how inventive, has a stuffy, old country air about it, a tradition that is too traditional to really be new. To be sure, the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw American symphony orchestras and instrumentals take their place among the greatest in the Western world. And they did present new music by native composers. The most performed among them, however—artists like Aaron Copland, George Gershwin, and Leonard Bernstein—tended to borrow elements from the new popular musics, blurring stylistic lines that were still fairly well-defined in Europe.

American composers who followed the lead of the Second Viennese School had a harder time of it. They, like many musicians, had to become teachers to pay the bills. For them, though, academia became more than a steady paycheck; it became a refuge. As exemplified by Milton Babbitt's 1957 lecture, published a year later under the misleading title "Who Cares if You Listen?", these composers saw institutes of higher learning as places that could "provide a home for the 'complex,' 'difficult,' and 'problematical' in music." The separation between "advanced music" and "the whistling repertory of the man in the street" was viewed as a necessity, since the former is not meant to appeal to the musically uneducated. For many decades, this attitude permeated academia

and had the ultimately self-destructive effect of creating an isolationist and elitist mentality within conservatory walls. While the rest of the country kept on exploring new music that had developed more organically, composers of "serious" music created complexities that rarely escaped the ivory towers in which they were conceived. Those towers also watched over the training grounds for new composers; anyone striving for a degree in composition had to write atonally whether they wanted to or not.

This changed, as did so many things, in the 60s. Young composers in music schools began to experiment, defiantly looking to other sources of inspiration: the soundscapes of electronics, the exoticism of non-Western musics, and the directness of Western popular music, that very repertory of the whistling man. And why not? That's what the most successful American composers had been doing all along. But academia has a hard time breaking its habits. So an odd form of stylistic hybridization evolved, melding the technical skills and theoretical complexity still required of higher learning with the simpler, more spontaneous approaches of popular genres. Since no formalized methodology for this evolved, each music school developed its own approach, depending on who was teaching there. During my time as a graduate student at the University of Michigan, I often took part in an annual festival of new music called The Midwestern Composers Symposium, in which composers from the major music schools in the region presented their latest on a series of concerts. After a while, looking at the program booklet to see which composer came from what school became unnecessary; the first few measures of a piece gave it away. A large part of that "tell" was the extent to which the various types of music that had found their way into the conservatory experience over the past few decades were mixed and (mis)matched.

bility that this both affords and demands is empowering, since any given thought or emotion can be expressed through whatever sonic language best suits it.

Of course, these days, one can barely keep up with the *prestissimo* pace of change. The Internet and digital media have become platforms for the most fundamental shifts in the way music is created and experienced since the advent of print, and it's hard to predict where it will all go. For instance, the potential of crowdfunding as a generator of arts capital is only beginning to be realized by composers and ensembles alike. Even off-line, the older rich crowd seem more and more open to un-Mozartian music, perhaps because they were the generation that, in their youth, reveled in the new varieties of the counter-culture. It is an exciting and scary time for us composers, as we try to bring meaning to what we do by getting others to hear it through both familiar and new means.

Education plays a big role, too; but that's a whole other block of rosin.

### JUN — VERANSTALTUNGEN

2. – 6. — **OmlU — Original mit Untertiteln — Exkursion zur Münchener Biennale für neues Musiktheater 2016**  
Studierende erhalten die Möglichkeit, an vier aufeinanderfolgenden Tagen die Produktionen der diesjährigen Biennale wahrzunehmen und sich während eines mehrtägigen Symposiums mit Echoräumen und Suchbewegungen im heutigen Musiktheater zu beschäftigen.
11. — 19 Uhr — **Hanns Eisler Komponisten Forum und Aufführungspreis**  
HfM Hanns Eisler Berlin, Charlottenstraße 55, Studiosaal, Eintritt: 4€  
Karten unter 030/20309-2101 oder [www.hfm-berlin.de](http://www.hfm-berlin.de)  
Programm: Elisabeth Angot, Stück für Sopran und fünf Instrumente; Lea Danzeisen, Denkmachine; Roberto Fausti, Trio; Daniel Martínez Roura, Elipsis; Mert Morali. »Wirf einen Stein in die Ewigkeit«; Josep Planells Schiaffino, Satz  
Wettbewerb mit freundlicher Unterstützung der Hanns und Steffy Eisler Stiftung.
13. — 12 Uhr — **Barbara Lüneburg: »Instrument und Live-Elektronik«**  
UdK Berlin, UNI.K Studio, Fasanenstr. 1b, Raum 214  
Die Violinistin und Forscherin Barbara Lüneburg (PhD) ist zu Gast bei Kirsten Reese im Seminar »Elektroakustische Komposition«.  
Sie wird Anwendungen von Violine und Live-Elektronik vom Mikrofon bis hin zur Live-Sensortechnik anhand von Beispielen aus ihrer langjährigen eigenen Praxis in der zeitgenössischen Musik- und Mediamusik vorstellen.
13. — 18 Uhr — **KlangKunstBühne spezial: Öffentliche Lecture von She She Pop**  
UdK Berlin, Bundesallee 1-12, Kleiner Vortragssaal  
Die Berliner Performancegruppe She She Pop gibt in Vorbereitung ihres Workshops »Uneins sein«, der vom 1.-7. August an der UdK Berlin stattfindet, im Rahmen einer Lecture Einblicke in ihre Arbeitsweise und aktuelle Projekte.  
Mehr Informationen unter: [www.klangkunstbuehne.de](http://www.klangkunstbuehne.de)

### VORSCHAU — VERANSTALTUNGEN IM JULI/AUGUST

30. Juli + 6. August — **KlangKunstBühne spezial**  
30. Juli — 18 Uhr: Abschlusspräsentation des Workshops »Die handelnde Stimme« mit Jurij Vasiljev  
UdK Berlin, Bundesallee 1-12, Probensaal  
An diesem Abend zeigen die TeilnehmerInnen des Workshops mit dem Regisseur und Sprechpädagogen Jurij Vasiljev die Ergebnisse ihrer Arbeitswoche.  
6. August — 19 Uhr: Abschlusspräsentation des Workshops »Uneins sein« mit She She Pop  
UdK Berlin, Bundesallee 1-12, Probensaal  
Zwischen dem 1. und 7. August wird das Performance-Kollektiv She She Pop, vertreten durch Ilija Papatheodorou, Lisa Lucassen und Sebastian Bark, einen einwöchigen Workshop im Rahmen der KlangKunstBühne spezial geben. An diesem Abend zeigen die TeilnehmerInnen des Workshops die Arbeitsergebnisse der Woche.  
Es sind noch wenige Restplätze für die Kurse der KlangKunstBühne spezial 2016 verfügbar.  
Anfragen bitte an [klangkunstbuehne@udk-berlin.de](mailto:klangkunstbuehne@udk-berlin.de)



Needless to say, there are many details missing from this outline, not the least of which are the distinctly regional flavors that abound; the term "American music" is a very large umbrella. The upshot, though, is that contemporary concert music occupies a strange place in our culture. It is a place in which its creators attempt to breathe life into sound by melding intelligence and visceral expression through sophisticated sonic craft while trying to appeal to a wide variety of listeners. We do this, however, in a sub-niche of a corner of music that is already struggling to find enough audiences to support it, something that our disciplinary myopia often makes us forget. Google will reveal surveys that list the most performed living American composers over the last few years. To me and my peers, they read like a Who's Who of our field. But if we were to ask most of our fellow citizens, from whose lips freely flow songs by the likes of Beyoncé and Taylor Swift, the names of our highly accomplished colleagues—John Adams, Jennifer Higdon, Christopher Rouse—would be meaningless.

Maybe John Williams would ring a bell; but he also wrote the soundtrack to the action-adventure fantasies of a whole generation. And this highlights another aspect of new music in the U.S.: The lines between "serious" and "popular" music have always been a bit fuzzy. For instance, some of our best film music rivals the standards of the symphonic literature; and, conversely, some of our symphonic literature comes from film music. Moreover, the last 40 years have seen conservatory-trained composers not only explore other "non-Classical" genres, but actually live and work in them; the image of the conservatory student who is also a Heavy Metal guitarist has become almost cliché. Stylistic lines are so diffuse these days, the categorical cartography looks like a blurry Rothko painting. For some, this is a weakness. How can you have standards if there is no standard? For others, the flexi-

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Impressum  
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