

Busoni's Garden

Plea for a new concept of contemporary music

The way the general view of contemporary 'serious' music relates to everyday reality is awkward, to say the least. On the one hand, we are told that those more or less contemporary composers of so-called 'serious' music, who are considered great composers, have – as it were – taken over the torch from their illustrious predecessors from the past, on the other hand the interest in their music is most limited. According to Ed de Boer, this phenomenon is related to the current concept of contemporary art in general, a concept that, in his view, sprouts from the 19th century concept of progress. He argues that, together with the disappearance of the remnants of this concept, gradually a different picture will emerge of contemporary 'serious' music; a picture that will match everyday reality much better than is the case now.

In 1996, I held a lecture at the Gent conservatory on the notion of originality in so-called 'serious' contemporary music. What I didn't know was that my lecture was part of a so-called 'Week of Modern Music'. It turned out that some of my statements met with a considerable amount of resistance by some of the people present, and in the discussion that followed, my fiercest opponents called me a 'neo-Platonist', as I had admitted that I hold beauty in art, also in contemporary art, in high esteem.

One of the things I postulated was that the concept of originality has obviously undergone a shift of meaning in the course of time, since 'originality' contains the word *origin*. In the Middle Ages, the device concerning renewal was that originality needs to have an origin in what already exists: *nihil innovetur nisi traditum* – nothing is to be renewed except what has been handed down. Today however, it seems that especially only such contemporary art is considered original which has no link with any origin outside of the work of art itself.

In my lecture, I also argued that in many cases it cannot be explained *why* some music is experienced as being beautiful. To illustrate this, I played *Chi del gitano i giorni abbella* from Verdi's opera *Il Trovatore* with one altered note in the melody. For inexplicable reasons, the strong effect that the original has, was destroyed by this alteration. Next, I played a so-called 'subsidiary theme' from the opening movement of a Mozart piano sonata: a theme that is presented, not at the beginning, but only after a while. Then I raised the question whether it would be possible to *start* a piece of music with this theme, playing it once more, this time quasi as the opening bars of the piece. Everyone felt that this didn't work, but no-one, including myself, could explain why. From these experiences I drew the conclusion, that we should be cautious with the criteria we use for judging music in general, and therefore for judging contemporary music, too. After all, we know very little about *why* something does or does not work.

What was the hardest to digest for part of my Gent audience, was my assumption that the quality of music is an intrinsic quality, independent of my or someone else's opinion of it. (Of course its effect is also dependent of the quality of the performance, but let's leave this aside.) After all, if this wouldn't be the case, there wouldn't be an 'Iron Repertoire'. If music wouldn't possess any intrinsic qualities that determine its quality, one person would swear by Kozeluch and someone else would coincidentally consider his contemporary Mozart a better composer. For yet someone else the music of Bach would be no match for that of Krebs. There couldn't be anything like a widely supported consensus about the fact that Bach and Mozart belong to the composers that stand out of the rest. In this connection, I differentiate between what I call, for want of better terms, 'incoming effect' and 'emanating effect'. 'Incoming effect': one and the same music 'enters' different people in very different ways, 'enters' even one and the same person differently, depending on his or her mood and the time of day. 'Emanating effect' however,

transcends how you or I experience the effect. During my lecture, I went a step further by stating that it is exclusively its ‘emanating effect’ that determines the quality of a given piece of music. And for that reason it is of the utmost importance for a composer to relate his or her knowledge, craft and intuition to this ‘emanating effect’ as much as possible.

I admit at once that the subject is complex. One might be inclined to deduce from what I said before, that I think it is the majority who determines what is good and what is bad music. But it’s not that simple. Very many people rather listen to house music than to music by Mozart, but even so, few people will want to insist that house music be the better music. This statement can be extrapolated to the hypothetical: even if the entirety of humanity to the last person would have descended to the level of computer games, obtuse TV programs, fast food and house music, and if as a result Bach’s music would be wasted on everybody, Bach’s music wouldn’t become any less good because of this. The reverse can also be said: even if in such a situation all of humanity would consider house music the *coolest* music in the world, this wouldn’t make such music any better.

It is on the subconscious level that we experience this one altered note in Verdi’s *Chi del gitano i giorni abbella* as being not right. The big problem here is the limitation of our subconscious knowing: much easier can we feel *that* this one note isn’t right than that we can explain *why* this is the case. With this in mind, let’s look at how different kinds of 20th and 21st century *avant-garde* music is appreciated. Then a stark contrast becomes evident: an army of experts from the ranks of composers, musicologists, conductors and performing musicians have for decades been impressing upon classical music loving audiences that certain contemporary composers wrote or write very good music, whereas only a very limited part of those audiences seems to feel real enthusiasm for it. Efforts to ‘raise’ audience understanding in such a way that it would learn to appreciate this music, have never amounted to anything. The great composers from former times remain very much preferred to many officially worshiped composers from the present and the recent past.

This situation is very different from the past and this gives food for thought. Music history books clearly show that it has always been only natural to have a lively interest in the music of one’s own era. And such an interest can clearly be seen today, too – as far as the kind of contemporary music that we have labelled ‘light’ music is concerned.

A few fascinating examples illustrate the phenomenon described above. Who knows Schönbergs first so-called ‘dodecaphonic’ composition: his *Klavierstück*, opus 23 no. 5 from 1923? Who knows the first so-called ‘serial’ composition in history: Olivier Messiaens piano piece *Mode de valeurs et d’ intensités* from 1949? Who knows Karlheinz Stockhausens *Hymnen* from 1967, Iannis Xenakis’ *Pythoprakta* from 1956, or Pierre Boulez’ *Marteau sans Maître* from 1954/’57? In how many CD shops are there recordings of these and similar works available? How many sheet music shops have these and similar scores in stock? Hardly any. Even so, in music history books and music encyclopaedias these composers and especially these works from their oeuvres are considered important and ground breaking. In contrast to this: who doesn’t know Leonard Bernsteins *West Side Story* from 1957, Dmitri Shostakovich’ second piano concerto from 1957 or Paul McCartney’s *Yesterday* (1965) or *Eleonore Rigby* (1966), to mention only a few random examples? This music is well-known far and wide and amply available. Even Shostakovich’ own assessment, that he had finished a concerto had ‘that does not possess any artistic or spiritual value at all’¹ hasn’t prevented countless performances of his second piano concerto, dozens of CD recordings; nor has it prevented that it has been arranged, used for a choreography, etc. Still, these and similar works are generally judged to be of no value for the history of 20th century art music, either because they are considered not innovative enough, or because they are reckoned among so-called ‘light’ and therefore non-art music, or for both reasons.

¹ Letter from Dmitri Shostakovich to Edison Denisov, February 12, 1957

The myth of progress

For a long time it has been thought that a broad appreciation of what at some point we have started to call 'modern music' would come over time. My music history teacher during my student days, for example, assured us that Anton Webern's music would eventually find equally broad access as Beethoven's. 'You see', he argued, 'even Von Karajan has by now recorded his music with the Berlin Philharmonic.' A persistent myth about the premiere of Strawinsky's *Sacre du Printemps* in 1913 points into the same direction. This performance ended, as is generally known, in a scandal, whereas this (at the time so revolutionary) piece is now generally accepted as one of the 20th century's master pieces – and justly so. In short: Strawinsky was ahead of his time and only after a while his composition was recognized as the stroke of genius that it is. Thus the myth of the *Sacre* lends itself to sustaining the myth of the genius who is undervalued in his own time. What is much less well-known, is, that the scandal about the premiere had to do chiefly with the choreography and the dance, and that the composition's concert performance in 1914, only one year later, was a tremendous audience success.

The myth of the *Sacre* and my music history teacher's remark sprout from an optimistic conception of progress, that was typical of the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th. The general opinion was, that humanity was continually developing in an upward direction in all conceivable fields: what came later was thought to be an improvement of what had come before. As far as the development of Western art music is concerned, this way of thinking manifested itself as follows: in the 19th century, an ever increasing need to chromatically modulate from one key to the next lead to what we now call 'floating tonality'. Then the tonal system exploded. It could no longer fulfil the needs of the new age. As a result, so-called 'atonality' came into existence. At first atonality was free, but, in order to oppose the danger of chaos, a new musical system had to be invented. The Austrian composer Arnold Schönberg provided the musical world with such a new system: his version of the so-called dodecaphony or twelve tone system. Characteristic for the music written according to this system is a hitherto unprecedented complex organisation of the tone's four attributes: pitch, duration, dynamics and colour. This increased complexity was interpreted as the logical continuation of obsolete tonality's abolishment. In subsequent musical systems this complexity increased even further.

Funnel

Let's consider in more detail a description of the 'serious' music of the 20th century according to this conception of progress: chapter XX, *The Twentieth Century*, from Donald Jay Grout's standard book *A History of Western Music*, the book many conservatory and musicology students from my and other generations have been educated with. In this chapter, the most important 'serious' composers of our century are treated, not in more or less chronological order, but according to their music's progressive complexity. Grout begins with Bartók (1881-1945). Then he briefly deals with Kodaly (1882-1967), Orff (1895-1982), Prokofiev (1891-1953) and Shostakovich (1906-1975). The last two composers together get two paragraphs. Next, he describes the English composers Vaughan Williams (1872-1950) and Gustav Holst (1874-1934). These are immediately followed by four lines about William Walton (1902-1983) and one paragraph about Benjamin Britten (1913-1976).

Then the United States are represented by Gershwin (1898-1937), Copland (1900-1990), Harris and a few more composers, until Elliot Carter (°1908) is reached. Bernstein (1918-1990) isn't mentioned. After a short trip to Latin-America (Villa-Lobos, Chavez and Ginastera) we return to Europe with among others Milhaud (1894-1974) and Poulenc (1899-1963). Then suddenly Paul Hindemith (1895-1963) gets a full five pages. Next follow 2½ page Messiaen (1908-1992) and – only now! – ten pages Stravinski (1882-1971).

Only after all this it's the turn of the so-called 'Second Viennese School', the three composers that put twelve tone music on the map: Schönberg (1874-1951), who gets 11½ pages, Berg (1885-1935) and Webern (1883-1945). Compare these last dates with those of Bartók: 1881-1945. In my student days, the

next paragraph *After Webern* was the close of the book. Here ‘avant-garde’ composers like Boulez, Cage, Xenakis, Varèse, Stokhausen and Ligeti are covered. These composers were all born between 1912 and 1920 – like Britten, by the way. Except Edgard Varèse: **1883-1965!**

We read nothing about any form of so-called ‘light’ music. Grout exclusively deals with ‘art music’ and according to him ‘popular’ music doesn’t belong to this category. There is logic there: ‘light’ music never conformed to the dogma of ‘progress’. In order to make the picture fit, all such music had to be classed in a department that doesn’t really count: folk music, music-of-the-people from former times. ‘Popular music as such, of course, is no modern phenomenon; such music has always flourished along with the art music with which this book deals’.² Finished, full stop; easily dealt with.

Grout’s classification of 20th century ‘serious’ music implicitly amounts to a statement like the following: in the course of the 20th century, music has gradually become ever more complex, and this trend will continue, and even more than that: its trend towards complexity will have to be continued. As a result, only such music can count as ‘serious’, that fits into this mould. Thus, a description of 20th century ‘serious’ music according to this concept of ‘progress’, makes one think of squeezing a great amount of liquid through a funnel.

The thus emerging picture does not match reality, in many aspects and already since a very long time. This becomes apparent by, for instance, the new closing paragraph that Grout added to his book in a later edition. It deals with so-called ‘minimalism’, a type of music that is organized in a relatively simple way, which made an apparently unstoppable ascent out of nothing during the eighties of the previous century. Of course, from a historical point of view it is inevitable to deal with this phenomenon, and it is also quite understandable why this trend came into being, but in the perspective as sketched by Grout, it appears out of the blue, completely unexpected and without being rooted in anything.

It’s only logical that this picture contrasts so much with reality. At some point, more complex than super-complex is no longer possible; as it is impossible to be more nude than stark nude. Nor is it logical to assume that a continuing increase of complexity will be appreciated. Schönberg thought that in the future even children would sing atonal twelve tone ditties, but in practise all beloved music is as tonal nowadays as it has always been. 20th century art music may in some respects have made strong ‘progress’, it may by now be called a fact that only very few people can feel real love for the sounding result of many ‘modern’ possibilities. A few examples: on classical radio stations by far most of the music that is broadcast is hundred(s of) years old, and this is even more true of classical request programs; and during important ritual ceremonies like weddings or funerals, moments where we realize even deeper than usual how important music is to us, contemporary ‘serious’ music is hardly ever performed. Slowly the presumption seems justified that all this will remain so, as long as the way we look at ‘modern’ music doesn’t change.

The essence of music

Today’s everyday reality doesn’t match with Schönberg’s perception, but it does match with his contemporary’s Ferruccio Busoni (1866-1924). Like Schönberg, Busoni, too, felt the excitement of unprecedented new possibilities at the horizon, and his music, too, bears witness of this. Besides this, he, too, entrusted his visions to paper by means of the written word. His *Entwurf einer neuen Ästhetik der Tonkunst* (*Concept of a new aesthetic of music*) from 1906 / 1916 made quite a stir. Colleague composer Hans Pfitzner reacted vehemently with his essay *Futuristengefahr* (*Danger of futurists*) (1917). But in contrast to Schönberg, in Busoni’s writings there is no trace of the above described notion of musical ‘progress’, neither in his music, nor in his writings. To him, Bach and Mozart were unsurpassed giants, who had penetrated deeper than everyone else into the intangible mystery of music, and as a result, his interest in renewal went hand in hand with his fascination for the essence of music as an intrinsic quality.

² Donald Jay Grout: *A History of western Music*, introduction to chapter XX: The Twentieth Century. Norton & Company Inc., New York, 1973.

In an article entitled *Vom Wesen der Musik (On the essence of music)* from 1924, Busoni compares music as a whole to a gigantic garden and a composer to ‘a gardener, to whom a strip of land of smaller or greater proportion has been allocated for cultivating. It falls unto him to pluck whatever grows on his site, at any rate to organize it, to compose a bouquet from it, when it comes up, and make a garden out of it. It falls unto this gardener to grip and model whatever he can reach with his eyes and arms (his power of discernment).’ A little further on, Busoni notices that ‘the comparison is weak and doesn’t suffice, insofar as flora covers only the earth, whereas music permeates and penetrates a complete universe, invisible and unheard.’³

Of course he couldn’t imagine how much new territory of this infinitely large garden would be cultivated in the course of the 20th century. (For this is undeniably the picture that emerges if we drop the artificial borderline between ‘serious’ and ‘light’ music. It cannot be insisted that one category automatically belongs to art music and the other doesn’t. Salieri’s *March of Welcome* that has become famous through the film *Amadeus* isn’t necessarily better than *Yesterday*.) Undoubtedly, Busoni couldn’t have had any notion of all those completely new sounds beyond his horizon that we classify under several types of jazz, pop, world music, etc. But this development does fit into the picture evoked by him; a picture that reminds one of a funnel turned upside down, rather than one standing upright.

And that’s not the only thing that suddenly does match reality now. In Busoni’s garden metaphor the maxim mentioned earlier *nihil innovetur nisi traditum* is valid as well. Every new gardener will have to start with learning the general techniques of gardening, surely by means of imitation – unfortunately a curse word in the art world, nowadays. And by this metaphor the concept of originality again gets a meaning in which the root *origin* can be recognized: ‘Within this section that is dominated by a human (...) the individual mind feels by natural sympathy especially attracted to certain spots and scenes (...). The creative musician prefers these moments in such an outspoken way, that in his works he returns to them with pleasure and often, in such a way, that we, the others, learn to recognise him because of this.’⁴ How simple and how to the point!

Implicitly, Busoni’s garden metaphor encourages learning by imitation, something which is discouraged by the concept of ‘progress’. In extreme cases such a discouragement can, in combination with the meaning now attached to the concept of originality, result in striving after being different for no other reason than just being different. In order to reach this, it is then above all recommended not to follow any rules, as this can be seen as docile and conventional. Then why bother to learn rules if you aren’t going to follow them anyway? In this way, the concept of ‘progress’ can lead to lack of craftsmanship. In my life I have seen many scores that bear the mark of this way of thinking.

Some readers may be inclined to think that I am criticizing a situation which since long belongs to the past. To a certain degree, this is quite true. But even so, remnants of the notion of ‘progress’ still determine the way new ‘serious’ compositions are judged and valued by music ‘experts’, whose concept of music history has been heavily influenced by books like Grout’s *A History of Western Music*. And this isn’t the only inheritance. Many contemporary composers of ‘serious’ music appear to lack the necessary skill and craftsmanship. This considerably hampers such composers in composing good music, regardless of their innate talent and their good intentions.

In 2006, I conducted an experiment to prove this point. A few years earlier, two of my sons, then five and ten years of age and not yet musically educated, had enjoyed themselves by playing random notes on my electrical piano. As the piano was connected to my computer, these notes were fed into my scorewrite program. The experiment consisted of transforming my sons’ notes into what on paper would look like a well-written avant-garde score and having the eventual result judged by a number of experts on the field

³ Ferruccio Busoni: *Vom Wesen der Musik (On the Essence of Music)*. Max Hesses Verlag, Berlin, 1956.
Translation: EdB

⁴ Ferruccio Busoni: *Vom Wesen der Musik*. Translation: EdB

of contemporary music. The prescribed instruments were determined by my then five year old son, whom I showed a list of instruments to choose from.

I imposed the following 'game rules' upon the procedure: I allowed myself to bring my knowledge and craftsmanship into the play, as far as the elements concerned were not essential to the actual creative process – distributing the notes among the available instruments, tempo, dynamics, articulation, etc.; on the essence itself, however—the notes, as played by my children – I only allowed myself to implement non-artistic, technical operations that have nothing to do whatsoever with any form of a creation process or of musical intuition; like applying bar changes in retrospect and submitting the notes to mechanical computer controlled processes of my scorewrite program, such as applying bar changes in order to realize the high degree of complexity that characterizes an 'avant-garde' score, doubling the note values or 'retrograding' the order of notes.

In September 2006, I sent the score to the Dutch *Fonds voor de Scheppende Toonkunst* (Council for the Creation of Music), with a request for a 'commission in retrospect'; implying that the composition would be judged by two independently operating advisory committees, each consisting of a composer, a conductor and a musicologist. In December 2006 came the answer: '*Your request to be granted a commission in retrospect for your composition 'Bubbles' (...) was reviewed during the past adjudication session . In reference to this, the Board have decided to grant this request. This decision is based on the advice of two independent committees, using compositional quality as the primary criterion in reviewing all applications. Both committees judged in favour of this work. They held the opinion that the relatively short composition was competently made and that it surpasses your regular output as far as its idiom is concerned. (...)*'⁵The key question of the experiment: whether it would be possible to let non-composing pass for composing, could be answered with *yes*. More details about the experiment can be found in the score (published by *Opus 33 Music*) and on Youtube (search for the combination 'Comitas' and 'Bubbles').

What is even more interesting, though, is the following. We may assume that the different sections of the infinitely large musical garden all have their own spheres, moods and emotional values. It may well be that the tendency to compose on the basis of an ever more complex organisation of the musical parameters eventually lead to sections with a sphere that to most people simply isn't and will never ever be attractive; considerably less attractive at any rate than the emotional values of those sections where all these great composers of 'iron repertory' music did their horticulture with obvious pleasure. (As time goes on, terms like 'modern' or 'avant-garde' for such complex music match reality less and less, by the way.)

(Perhaps there are, besides the ground of overly complex music yet other sections where most people don't like to come by nature, or – already Plato warned against this – which aren't very healthy for humans, even if they do like to come there. I personally think that, for instance, house music falls into this last category. This subject is beyond the scope of this article. I dedicated a lecture to it, entitled *Music and Spirituality*.)

In terms of the garden metaphor: it might well be that in the little parcels that each composer/gardener has to his disposal, there are nooks and corners where the soil is so bad, that as a rule these are best left alone. The concept of 'progress' may lead a composer/gardener to think that especially such sections need to be used, in the name of renewal and 'originality'. One might be inclined to think that the fruits of such conduct will, together with the ongoing continuation of human development, at some point become esteemed common property. Busoni's metaphor however, leads to a contrary conclusion: sections that we now experience as inaccessible will be just as inaccessible in two hundred years.

⁵ Letter from the *Fonds voor de Scheppende Toonkunst* to Ed de Boer, 14 December, 2006.

Conclusion

Should this last conclusion be right, then the implications are far reaching. To begin with, many ‘modern’ composers and other advocates of ‘modern’ music make things needlessly difficult for themselves, for one another and for audiences. The remains of the 19th century linear concept of ‘progress’ have lead many composers to explicitly *not* cultivate those parcels of garden soil whose flora most people experience as beautiful. For, so they think, everything that can grow there, ‘has already been done’ and therefore cannot produce anything ‘original’. Much fertile ground was thus declared ‘forbidden territory’ and many have pushed themselves and others ever further into the direction of ever less accessible remote corners. Where, in the added closing paragraph of Grout’s *A History of Western Music*, minimalism suddenly appears out of the blue, in terms of Busoni’s garden metaphor the following happens: since music cannot become ever more complex in all eternity, all at once it was permitted to enter a more or less newly discovered small area, that did not correspond with the general tendency until then. The ensuing music proved to be very successful with a specific audience and could furthermore be branded new in the sense of a new movement. Because of this, whoever chose for this trend, was still up to date. Other areas like for instance ‘new spiritual music’ or ‘cross-over music’ were subsequently permitted, too. And fortunately, more and more such areas now come into view. Busoni’s metaphor, however, makes it clear that there is no reason to declare any area of the garden forbidden territory. The only thing we have to do is to let go of the remains of the concept of ‘progress’ and again start to concentrate exclusively at creating beautiful music. And let each composer above all make use of such melodic, harmonic, rhythmic and vocal/instrumental turns and combinations that he or she personally likes best. Music that is realized in this way, can be truly original and yet ‘look like something’, too. The music of Mozart for instance, also his fully developed, mature music, strongly resembles the music of Johann Christian Bach. There are striking resemblances, but besides this there are striking differences as well.

This also implies that eventually we will no longer connect the quality of a contemporary piece of music with the question whether or not it could have been written somewhere in the past. A song from the 20th century can very well be a masterpiece, even though it contains only rhythmical, melodic and harmonic patterns that were already known in Schubert’s time. The marvellous and world famous song *Eleonore Rigby*, mentioned earlier, with in fact only two chords: e minor and C major, is an example of this. The only thing that counts is the essence of music, its indefinable, intangible ‘emanating effect’. At the end of his article, Busoni writes: ‘People will never recognize the essence of music in its genuineness and completeness, but may they at least reach the point to perceive what does **not** belong to it. *It is above all the ‘guild’ that stands in the way here, just like the dogma stands opposite faith.* [Italicisation by EdB] Sometimes, in rare cases, a mortal has heard something unearthly in the essence of music; something that flows away from one’s hands, as soon as one grabs at it; that stiffens, as soon as one wants to plant it here below; that extinguishes, as soon as it is dragged through the obscurity of our mentality. Even so, so much of its heavenly origin remains recognizable, that it seems to us the highest, noblest and clearest of all the high, noble and clear things that recognizably surround us.’⁶

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Ed de Boer

Ed de Boer composes under the pseudonym Alexander Comitas. His opera The Emperor’s New Clothes, in which his composition-with-random-notes Bubbles has been incorporated, is to be premiered in 2013 during the World Music Contest for wind orchestras in Kerkrade, The Netherlands, in cooperation with the Dutch opera company Opera Zuid.

⁶ Ferruccio Busoni: Vom Wesen der Musik. Translation: EdB