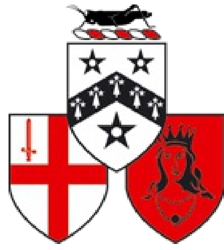

The Concert of the Past
Transcript

Date: Thursday, 31 October 2002 - 12:00AM

The Concert of the Past

by

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THE CONCERT OF THE PAST

Professor Piers Hellawell

My first talk examined successive historical views of what music is and does. Specifically, we were concerned with rhetoric. As music, like speech, unfolds in time (nowadays known as 'real time'), it shares with speech a need for rhetoric as its shaping factor. This shape factor governs music's message - what music 'says to us' - and we saw how music history is the story not just of new musical materials but of different rhetoric around them; some ages evolved tight codes of expression, while others saw fervent and fevered experimentation with the message, which was then correspondingly cloudier.

If those matters surround what music is, in terms of message, I am concerned today with where music is, in the sense of medium. Whose is it? Where do we keep it? We may think we know, but in these questions, as in rhetoric, complacency is fatal. Music consistently outwits all attempts to store, own, quantify and of course sell it - as I pointed out last time. It is sublimely ambiguous. This leaves it open to exploitation, but at the same time allows it to float free. So does music belong to the composer, perhaps? Try telling that to Samuel Barber, whose intimate string quartet slow movement has been obnoxiously hijacked as a push-button gung-ho symbol in America - something this elegant, discreet composer would surely have loathed. Just as surely, the *Four Seasons* Concerti no longer belong to Vivaldi, but we discussed last time how Vivaldi's expectations might be different from Barber's; the early 18 h Century was a time of production and commodity, in which artistic hijacking was an up-front matter. In any case, no work in Western music better illustrates the problem of defining music's identity - where do we point at the 'real' *Four Seasons?* Do unearthed library scores hold the 'real' work, or does a really tight CD performance on Baroque-style strings hold the key - or what about Nige? It belongs to none yet to one and all.

I began last time by saying I envy anyone who can say 'now that's what I call music', and so, today, I want to sew dissent about where that music might be found, whether on the page, in our heads, on recordings or in the concerts of the past that give us today's title.

A large part of music's defiance of attempts to bottle it, which I am frequently invoking, lies in its being of no fixed abode. Not only is made of vaporous stuff, wordless, colourless and tasteless, but it is hard to find at home, and correspondingly resistant to being owned. Not so the other arts: in an age when we rightly celebrate the very temples, such as the Guggenheim Museums, which were built to house artefacts, it seems inevitable that the squirreling of tangible objects in such collections will provoke bidding wars. We often hear gasps of surprise at the sky-high prices paid for pictorial and sculptural art, in marked contrast to works of music, of course. Yet I find this market unsurprising, for the desire to own trophies, especially among the rich, can be gratified by a simple transaction around artefacts. Music is of little use in any of this, for it can hardly be taken home to be exposed to a select few, locked away, or stored in a bank. Of course, it can be limited to private performances by some princeling or patron, but its long-term ownership can hardly be controlled: it is a set of instructions, not the work itself, and any copies of those instructions dilute further the sense of private ownership as they disseminate and democratise the work.

This makes the art of commissioning music an altruistic act by comparison with that of commissioning, say, a sculpture. The wealthy commissioner of a new work by a major living composer is, in effect, funding the continuation of that composer's canon. The new work is introduced into the public domain, courtesy of the patron, but the unveiling is a public one at which some listeners will even be unaware whom they have to thank for its existence. It is of course unusual nowadays for that patron to be an individual, but even when a commission is, as sometimes in the USA, funded by wealthy benefactors, the work makes its way directly, or at least presently, into the concert hall domain. The benefactor may cherish a score, suitably inscribed, but it is only with realisation that music can be said to 'exist' within our lives - and no patron can restrict such wider realisation for long. A rare case was, according to legend, the *Requiem*that was Mozart's last work, for the story goes that a mysterious stranger commissioned a requiem for performance in conditions of great secrecy. This is a helpful illustration of my point, for this work is, of course, by now a universal property.

It may help to explore the notion of musical whereabouts with a very superficial, and personal, view of how Western music has become a preserved commodity over the last 1000 years, a view of our growing attempts to preserve the transient entity of music. I hope to show that 'the concert of the past', by which I mean the experience of music in previous ages, is something other than just a list of works, or a heap of programmes or dusty scores such as can be 'recreated' as a historical exercise. It is,

truly a lost experience, I believe, for while we have the music of the past, we are stuck with the ears of the present.

We are all aware, I think, that the making of music far predated attempts to pickle its dimensions in writing or other briny substance. First came the fruit, and then came the bottling. An overview of Western music might conclude that we stand today at a junction point of two intersecting lines, like a diminuendo sign with one much longer arm: this longer arm, reaching back into antiquity, is the making of music, while the shorter arm is the process of notating or recording it. Starting much later, it draws nearer to the other until they meet, round about now in fact. I saw now, because our own time sees a seismic change in the story of music preservation, which itself is only a footnote to the history of this art. In this notation story, today's electro-acoustic and other synthetic musics can be seen as a landmark, for in them music and medium, for so long two things in art music, have become inseparable. The repertoire of electro-acoustic work of the last 50 years exists solely in its realisation; usually it has no parallel image in a written score, but exists, in its OAT tape or computer file, the first score-less art music for 700 years.

EX Normandeau - from *Clair de terre*

Its performance is its sole existence, something that apparently marks it out from conventional media. But we shall be challenging that wisdom later, examining a view that perhaps all music is in the same state, yet more elusive than we thought.

I used that *decrescendo* image, of music and its representation drawing closer, because of course music was not always burdened with representation. Our increasingly sophisticated mechanisms for writing it down, and then recording it, have widened its perceived gulf with folk music: when music was all transient, it was perhaps less categorised, and a notion such as 'folk music' was not needed. Contrarily, if now we attempt a definition of 'folk' music, transience and the reliance on oral transmission (in purer forms) may be the greatest factor of distinction. All indigenous musics are primarily oral traditions, from the wooden pipe to Muddy Waters. The notion of recording what we call 'folk' music in the field, as it is called, is essentially a modern one, with its discipline, ethnomusicology - while the surviving 'folk' ethos, that the true music is what happens on the night and is then gone, is a reminder of what all music used to be. It is a truism that the concert of the past was not the luxury item of today, but the only way to hear music, though it would not have been convened in the modern sense until a few hundred years ago. No one could say 'I prefer to stay at home and hear the broadcast', because concerted playing *was* music, *was* the sole medium. Our modern tradition of art music as part of a live-relay, CD-ridden music culture is unable to comprehend this, for the urge to collect, to acquire and to recreate once again burns strong within us. This perpetuation is surely an accretion: music is, for most of its long history, something to which you listen carefully - because then it is gone. I argued in a talk last year, that jazz is the 'new' chamber music; in the context of this discussion, meanwhile, jazz also carries the modern mantle of a universal folk music.

The comparison between these folk and art cultures of music can be seen likewise in their approach to instrumentation (i.e. the instruments composers decide to deploy): I think it is another universal dimension of what we call folk music that instrumentation is a practical, as much as an artistic, matter. Music is given to, rather than suggested by, available instruments. When I teach my students, I urge them to compose with an instrument's identity in mind from the start, in preference to grafting abstract material onto that instrument; yet the reverse happens in, for example, Irish folk music. Each instrument brings its individual style to a shared material, by way of ornamentation and timbre - which are of course enhanced by player individuality as well. The tunes are common stock, a swelling sea of shared knowledge that is constantly losing and gaining. New melodies circulate, an oral tradition that is, ironically, oiled by today's commercial recordings, but these too are destined for any instruments, rather than, say, 'for flute'. Thus the true Irish music is a glorious unison hymn, uncluttered with chordal harmony, in which the diverse tones of fiddle, flute, button accordion or uillean pipes are mixed.

EX *Bridie Morley* (Packie Duignan, flute/Seamus Horan, fiddle)

The contrast with art music is felt startlingly when one attends a performance, or 'session': it follows from the above that the music is heard on whatever instruments are present, so that a melody might be heard in a bar one Thursday night played on three fiddles and two flutes, but on the next Thursday by button-key accordion, pipes and tin whistle. To one with a trained ear for timbre this is a fascinating mixture of colours, but it is essentially a chance process. By contrast, imagine turning up at the Queen's Hall in Edinburgh to hear Haydn String Quartets, only to find them played by two trumpets, mandolin and bassoon, on the grounds that they were the ones who 'showed up' tonight. As a listener, I have these two outlooks firmly compartmentalised in my head: I revel in the random diversity of the session, but am a purist when I hear art music transferred too freely from instrument to instrument. Cesar Franck's *Sonata* for violin to my ears works less well as the property of cellists, who sometimes appropriate it, but better that than as played on the flute, whither it found its way courtesy of James Galway! Where a composer

sanctioned the arrangement, as did Brahms of his *Sonatas op.120,* it seems somehow 'less bad'.

All this is probably because we listen to this music on specific instruments, while the Irish repertoire is in a constant state of migration. Yet the close association of work and exact instrumentation, like our reverend approach to its notated form, is a recent development -so back to my 'brief history'.

Just as art music grew away from folk culture by being preserved in notation, so it diverged in its growing instrumental stability. If we return to the 'broken consort' of the late 16th century, we find a much more practical approach that is essentially that of the Irish music, namely recognition that different ensembles may be available. For the commercial composer, of course, this was an important selling point, for free instrumentation would be more widely applicable. No one knew this better than Thomas Morley, one of the greatest figures of the age, who, according to the Encarta Dictionary **(1)**,

".. wrote and edited madrigals, lute songs, and instrumental ensemble music for the broken consort, the English instrumental grouping that was unusual in mixing strings and wind instruments."

The same article goes on to note that

"It was characteristic of ensemble music up to the mid-17th century to give a choice of instrumentation, the decision often being determined by function (for instance, to receive people of rank, for the theatre, or for teaching purposes) or by the social position of the players. Professional musicians were more likely to play violins and wind instruments, amateurs (a growing market) to play viols, This is clear from Anthony Holborne's publication of 1599, whose instrumentation is stated as being for "viols, violins, or other musical wind instruments".., The vast majority of Jacobean ensemble music (by Byrd, Gibbons, Lupo, Ferrabosco, and others) is clearly intended for a consort of viols,"

EX John Jenkins - *Fantasy no.3 (from 5'33'j*

If we push further back into the musical past, we find that scholars still argue about the basic instrumental premise of much music: while we receive the sacred music of the 14 th and 15 th music largely in vocal form today, it has been argued that it was also played on instruments. But it is clear that the notion of music for specific instruments is another recent acquisition; closer examination suggests that it comes, like so many other assumptions, from the fertile lava surrounding or preceding the eruption of Romanticism. Bach, with his astonishing ear for colour, nonetheless took a practical approach to recycling and arranging things that still has scholars scratching their heads; the repertoire is in a sense a floating one, music that can migrate from concerto to cantata. A little later, though, we find Haydn going further toward maximising the potential of available resources: this comes to a head in the *Symphony no*31, the 'Horn Signal', which is probably the first 'concerto' for orchestra. The presence at Esterhazy in 1765 of four expert horn players gave rise to this work's title, but no less amazing than the horn calls is the solo writing for everyone else in the orchestra, including violin, cello and even double bass! At this point the music is clearly instrument-specific, and the modern notion of specialised material is born - in fact the modern orchestra, with its reliance on individual colour contributions, is with us.

No doubt composers of that and subsequent times retained a far freer approach to instrumentation than do we, but I think from the later 18th Century onwards, their attitudes share more features with ours than otherwise. Our outlooks about instrumental possibilities are essentially the same. We know this from Beethoven's attempts to explore extreme colours: at a famous juncture in his *6h Symphony,* the flute has to complete a rising scale by jumping down an octave, presumably having reached its then upper limit. The effect on piano repertoire of developing keyboard technologies, in the hands of Broadwood and Clementi, is too big a topic here, but it can be felt in any substantial piano work of the early 19 th century and even earlier; it is part of a new attitude to instruments. A celebrated example from this period is Schubert's response to the appearance of a hybrid guitar-cello, the 'arpeggione' - his great *Sonata in* a. What is striking

is that a work of this magnitude was prompted by the appearance of a specific instrument, and not a very promising one - this Sonata seems to be its only lasting contribution to mankind, for it quickly became obsolete. To my knowledge this has not been attempted on the guitar, though it, like works mentioned earlier, is squabbled over by violists and cellists- with the latter playing it here.

EX Schubert - *Sonata in* a *minor 'arpeggione'* (iii)

Clearly such a response to instrumental colour and layout belongs to the modern outlook. **It** was soon followed by Wagner's experiments with exotic additions to the orchestra, notably the 'Wagner tubas' whose mellow tones enriched his brass section.

Before late Romanticism was spent, yet more exotic migrants would be given specific roles- heckelphone, saxhorn, viola d'amore and so on.

So in both preservation and scoring of music, we have moved from a 'here today, gone tomorrow' attitude to one of fixity. We should also not overlook the possibility that the one has conditioned the other: it seems sensible that more exact notation of music goes hand in hand with a more exact sense of who is playing it. Other, yet deeper, factors are also in play: the informality of Baroque notation is inseparable from its very fabric, the continuo bass. This was a 'walking' bass line above which the harmony might not be fully written out but given in a shorthand called *figured bass* - not unlike the guitar chord shapes given in arrangements of popular song. This bass line and harmony could be played by a keyboard, but the bass line might be taken by a cello, violone or bassoon - it was the *basso continuo.* Such open-ended notation was clearly part of a wider musical outlook, therefore, and I do not want to offer simplistic ideas of how notation reached its modern peak of precision.

That precision, like its preceding informality, was rooted in musical substance: a much-underrated feature of

Romanticism is the growing individuality of detail in piano figuration, so that we can tell, from the score or even by ear, the difference between Schubert's G major and that of Chopin or Schumann. Though this did not preclude continuing use of figured bass shorthand, it shows another aspect of the growing individuation of music to which I have returned so often. Even the vocabulary elements, such as decorative accompaniment, that were the topic of my previous talk were being subjected to a personalisation, becoming less a shared pool and more of a personal signature; hence their notation, too, became a matter of increasing precision, for the two go hand in hand.

EX Schumann - *Etudes Symphoniques, vaT III*

That was from Schumann, who acknowledged this new power of figuration as a signature with his saluting pastiche of Chopin in his *Carnaval.* Chopin was apparently unimpressed, but the point is that it is hard to imagine Mozart expressing his admiration for Haydn thus, in a pastiche of figuration.

All these aspects - the instrumentation, the figuration, its harmonic message, its notation - are inseparable parts of what we call 'music history', or, perhaps, the concert of the past. I have lingered upon notation and instrumentation as being salient barometers of the changing musical climate.

I do want to note that, like every such process, this evolution had its reaction, for the extreme precision of notation achieved in the avant-garde quickly produced a reaction, not least from performers driven demented by extreme demands. That demand usually held up as the *ne plus ultra* is the aesthetic of 'new complexity' - effectively that the composer's desired effect is achieved by loading the score with instruction of such complexity that the performer may struggle to achieve it accurately, especially in terms of rhythm; but it is the very intensity of the performer's efforts, rather than the totality of what is notated, that is sought.

Such an aesthetic will only be fulfilling to a limited cache of performers, though they are distinguished and quite numerous, and the result has been a swing in favour of much more 'open' notation that arguably allows much more initiative to the performer. An example of this has been the repertoire development of the Hilliard Ensemble, individuals of which had much previous experience in the experimental avant-garde. One former member told me he became finally exasperated by this because the composers of that modernist tradition sought such tight control on so much detail in a work - pinning the interpreter down, as it were. I shall return to this in my final topic, a related one of course, as that singer is my guest here on 18 th March.

I hope I have so far at least raised some doubts about the whereabouts of music. It inhabits a fluctuating territory that is neither exactly what is heard nor what is written down. From a composer's point of view, it would be equally unsafe to say music is what exists in the composer's mind, for that may be anything but clear - for many of us the process of writing the piece is itself one of clarification, but we are aware of infinite paths not taken, other possible forms of the work. So we are no nearer the work - nor should we be, for it is music. As I said last time, it sends each of us a sealed personal message, something only possible because of this ambiguity. If you do not believe me about this evanescence, ask five pianists to playa crotchet/quarter-note with a dot beneath it, which signifies *staccato* or 'short'. What is short? How long is this crotchet? Or ask them to playa passage *allegro,* briskly. No - I am, as I said to begin my previous lecture, less and less sure what, and where, is music.

If I sound anxious to play down the pre-eminence of the score, I may be out of step not just with my composer colleagues - we are naturally suspicious of free wheeling attitudes to our scores! - but with the wider spirit of our time, which has seen unrivalled scholarship in exploring the 'concert of the past'. Interpretation over the last hundred years has, after all, taken a long journey: if

I can summa rise, it runs from Romanticised, performer-centred interpretation of great character but less stylistic detachment toward performance seeking fidelity to what is understood to 'belong' to the music's original age. Such 'authentic' performance has its critics, no doubt from impressive scholarly standpoints, but I am concerned more with the moral question it raises: should performances exalt the spirit of the age as an arbiter of taste? Does the music still belong to that age, or that composer, after surviving them so long? It must be possible to argue that gut strings, short violin necks and open-holed flutes are utterly irrelevant to our age, and that music should be played on whatever we have - the 'folk' ethos again. For someone of that mind, the tireless study of performance treatises for stylistic fidelity may seem repressive, stifling interpretative decisions of the present by deferring to archaic precedent from conventions long dead.

It depends whether we ask pre-Classical music to evoke its own time or to speak to us about our own, a dilemma that is again for the individual- for each of us asks different things from music. This is not the place to have the authenticity debate, at least not till I welcome my guest, but I would urge that performers, rather than instruments or conventions, are the chief factor. The most outrageous stylistic 'transgressions' are compelling in the right hands, and a plurality of approaches is always desirable. The irony of the authenticity phenomenon is that it brings notions of prescription and appropriateness to a former age so much ~ open than our own to musical alternatives.

EX Bach - *Passacaglia in c arr* for viol consort by R Boothby

The question of music's whereabouts has, naturally, been thrown into much greater turmoil by the invention of sound recording - effectively adding a further plausible hiding-place to the existing two, the live performance and the written account. The notion of trapping the creature in ether does point temptingly to a solution, in that something we can hear over and over again seems to have a good case for being 'the work'. "I know that piece - I've heard it hundreds of times, I have a recording", we might say. Others resist this, feeling more than a whiff of necrophilia in treating a work like a butterfly with a pin through its middle. I well remember the exasperation of my piano teacher when, as a teenager, I was caught up in the craze for Boxed Sets of LP recordings; 'why not have a different pianist for every sonata?' he urged. He saw that I was not, of course motivated by interpretative fondness for one artist but by the collecting mania already alluded to - the desire to have the sonatas, or quartets or whatever, on my shelf.

Our attitude to recorded media is, like other features of life, subject to the familiar cultural cycle - hostility to innovation and then nostalgia when it is superseded. No doubt the arrival of the black vinyl LP on 33 rpm was greeted with suspicion, while today there are regular reports of a hero's return for 'the old LP'. These reports invariably recall some hi- fidelity that has supposedly been lost in the CD medium, which is criticised on the grounds of the unreality of digital sound. I think this is pretentious nonsense (though I do still enjoy my LPs), and I am surprised by this lingering fondness for the endless imperfections and murkiness of vinyl.

If performance of music is its soul, and its score is the body wherein it is supposed to live, where does that leave the recording? I suppose it is the photograph - a modern form of preservation that records the outer dimensions unblinkingly while often missing the glow within. Recently I heard on BBC Radio 4 **(2)** yet another discussion on the resurgence of the LP, in which someone said "you can almost see the music in between those grooves..."

Nonetheless, like the St Kilda inhabitants who feared the photography of early tourists lest it capture their souls, we remain sceptical of recording as a substitute for performance (of course it was the tourists whom the St Kildans should have feared, for it was they, not their pictures, who brought disease). "You had to be at the actual concert", people say, or else "the recording admirably recaptures the spirit of a live recording". All this misses the point: a recording can never be an alternative to music-making; it is the ~ to which it poses an alternative. The recording has come as an alternative form of storage, not of 'performance', which by definition has to be in the present. To preserve the real thing in a recording offers the music a different form of preservation, maybe chutney rather than pickle. But can a studio recording, that was never a live event, be held to be 'the work'?

As someone surrounded by art music since childhood, I cherish some works that I inhabit like a dwelling yet have never seen in score form. When I come across the pages in a library, or cannot avoid using a score for teaching music that, after all I know so well, I look shyly - and hope not to recall too clearly the strange written image. Of course I have learned these works predominantly through recordings and broadcasts, rather than the live performance yet, for all that, I sometimes feel that these works are the few whose essence I have savoured.

The problem is that the score while more remote as a trace, is the composer's (give or take any editorial problems) - while the

recording is the performer's slant on the score, hence technically at one further remove. Am I closer to that elusive essence by reading the composer's own text, traditionally the sacred source, or a realisation of that text? This question returns us to that posed at the start, of the ownership of the work. Is the work a balloon or a boomerang? If we hold that a composer speaks through, and continues to control, a work, then it is a boomerang, for the music endlessly reverts to the composer. If we see composition as a kind of send-off, however, the work is being released like a balloon, and it belongs to the finder. In my previous talk I retold my story about a listener praising the despair of what I thought my most life-asserting music. This suggested to me that it is hopeless to try and control what happens to music once you let it go: the 'public domain' is just that, a democracy that may be uncomfortable to the creator, for the creator is rapidly lost in the crowd, to become part of the concert of the past.

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Notes

1 'Consort Music' and 'Thomas Morley', Microsoft@ Encarta@Reference Library 2002. @ 1993-2001 Microsoft Corporation

2 'Broadcasting House', BBC Radio **4,** 7-7-02 .