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Contrary to the general doom and gloom about the decline of the guitar, I would like to suggest that we are in the middle of a classical guitar boom. We've never had it so good. The number of high-level professional players, (many with major record deals and international careers), international festivals, serious students, and large volume of quality new music being written is staggering. Contemporary music has a stronger foothold in the guitar recital canon than just about any other instrument.

In order to provide a contextual frame for the discussion this afternoon, I would like to touch on several closely related, but importantly separate, issues:

Firstly, the negative:

- The decline of Classical Music in the Mass Media
- The decline of contemporary music in Classical concerts
- The separation of composition teaching from performance teaching

But then a more positive outlook for now and for the future:

- The return of the performer/composer
- Improvisation/collaboration
- New music and the guitar

The decline of Classical Music in the Mass Media

The 1970s was not a 'Golden Age' for the guitar; it was a golden age for Classical Music – classical music education, classical music funding, and classical music coverage in the mass media. Free instruments and instrumental lessons in schools, a nationwide county youth orchestra pyramid structure, and performers like James Galway and Andre Previn, making frequent TV appearances (not just Julian Bream and John Williams).

It would appear that Classical music doesn't matter as much to British society now as it did then. We are told that Classical music audiences are getting smaller and older, and

that musical literacy levels are lower than they once were. The titles of recent books on the topic tell their own story:

Julian Johnson – Who needs Classical Music? Cultural Choice and Musical Value

Joshua Fineberg – Classical Music, Why Bother?

Lawrence Kramer – Why Classical Music Still Matters

Norman Lebrecht – When the Music Stops

The decline of contemporary music in Classical concerts

As if this wasn't bad enough, the place of contemporary classical music is shrinking within the diminishing world of classical music. As Leon Botstein tells us:

'New music for the concert stage commanded less attention during the second half of the [twentieth] century than at any time in the previous two hundred years.'

As the 19th Century wore on so the performance of new music gradually began to reduce in favour of a performing canon of old music. Between 1870 and 1945 there was a stable, though not untroubled, relationship between canonic repertoires and contemporary music. First concert programmes, the opera repertoires, were dominated by the classics, but new works none the less maintained considerable prominence.

However, between 1945 and 1980: an extreme, indeed intolerant predominance of classical over contemporary music in both concert and opera repertoires was paralleled by the rise of independent organisations led by composers for the performance of new works.

What caused new music to be annexed so brutally from 'classical' repertoire? Well, surely it had to be the uncompromisingly Modernist post-war aesthetic and the alienating harshness of atonality. The 'difficulty' of modernism as an alienating force has been well documented. Peter Maxwell Davies has said:

'Many concert-giving bodies have a knee-jerk reaction to any proposed performance of, say, a work of mine; 'We can't do that, the audience will stay away, and those that don't will hate it'. And I am relatively well-known and established!'

Julian Johnson elaborates further:

‘More than a century after its beginnings, musical modernism is little liked and even less understood. Few cultural phenomena can have been so little assimilated a hundred years after their production. It is symptomatic of our age, with its demand that everything be immediately accessible, that what requires thoughtful reflection should be so violently rejected... ‘Difficult’ modernist music makes almost everyone angry because it offends so obviously against the pseudo-democracy of the market, making itself inaccessible in a way that the market alone cannot overcome. The price it pays for this rebellion is to be silenced, because, in a musical world governed by commercial criteria, what doesn’t sell simply isn’t heard.’

But while the inaccessibility of modernism does contribute to the current climate, it has become a convenient excuse that masks other, more subtle issues.

The separation of composition teaching from performance teaching and the notation/music divide

One reason might lie in the way in which performers and composers were being trained at conservatoires and universities. In the 1920s and 30s, the performer/composer all but disappeared, as students were encouraged to specialise in one discipline or the other. Performance was practice-based, but composition was becoming theory-based. The line of Chopin, Liszt, Brahms, Rachmaninoff, suddenly broke off into Fischer, Brendel and Kissin.

Consequently, the didactic canon (the teaching and learning repertoire written by performer/composers) ceased to contain contemporary music and a vital link was broken. As Botstein points out ‘the sequence of violin methods and etudes from Kreutzer to Paganini has remained untouched since the generation of the seminal early-twentieth-century pedagogues like Sevcik, and Flesch’.

As early as 1902, only five per cent of the musicians giving recitals in Vienna performed their own compositions, and this pattern became increasingly entrenched as the century

wore on. This coincided with a radical reduction of new works in public performance; the standard string and piano repertory today is strikingly similar to that which was in place in 1914.

Orchestral repertoire suffered a similar fate:

‘In the period 1895-1900, works by composers who were alive, or who had died within the previous fifteen years, constituted over 50 per cent of the repertoire of the New York Philharmonic, whereas by 1950 that had dropped to less than 15 per cent.’ Botstein

This annexation of new music from the musical mainstream led to the rise of specialist new music ensembles and a separate performance culture. Simultaneously, the classical solo and chamber music canons were refined and eventually calcified, making it almost impossible for any new music to penetrate. In the last quarter of the twentieth century first performances of new works still occurred, but repeated performances and the inclusion of new works within the standard repertory became scarce.

Technical skills

I have asked numerous performers what they consider to be the main reasons why new music rarely gets a second hearing. The response nearly always focuses on a lack of sensitivity to idiom. Rohan de Saram of the Arditti quartet cited the cello part in a recent quartet by quite a well-known Spanish composer:

‘It was unplayable in its submitted form; there was a passage of double-stopped notes at an impossible speed. I had to rewrite the whole part. I am amazed how little some contemporary composers know about basic technical matters.’

This lack of a professional level of craft is a recurring issue when players are faced with new scores. It’s a problem that frequently eats up precious rehearsal time, as Peter Maxwell Davies warns:

‘When a new work is in rehearsal at, say, Covent Garden or the Royal Festival Hall, there are seldom composition students there learning the ropes, before they experience their own rehearsals under these very circumstances. It is the lack of practical experience among many later 20th Century composers which, along with the arcane nature of much of their music, so alienated musicians. One should work, as far as possible, with a practical knowledge of any difficulty in the work one might expect, being prepared with practical advice as how these may be resolved.’

Composition teaching

As the 20th Century wore on, the focus of composition teaching shifted as it became divorced from instrumental and vocal practice and moved closer to theoretical principles. Sonic exploration through the use of highly developed improvisation skills was replaced by a far more rigorously intellectual notation-centred approach. The dominance of post-Webern constructivism in the 1940s and 50s (and the influence of the Darmstadt Summer School) resulted in a paradigmatic shift away from the notion of performance-as-text to one of the-score-as-text. In academic circles, it became increasingly important that new compositions were able to stand up to examination by the latest analytical tools, rather than be subjected to close listening in a performance situation. Intuition and improvisation could not be academically scrutinised in the same way that constructivism and formalism could.

Unfortunately, this coincided with two cultural phenomena: The rise of the recording as the principal musical media and the fall in levels of participation in the traditions of concert and instrumental music.

As Botstein points out:

‘The processes of recording and broadcasting created unintended and novel commercial and structural barriers to the propagation of new music. An enlarged audience became familiar with music not by playing it themselves or remembering a live performance but by hearing a broadcast or, more importantly, by playing a record at home over and over again. It was repetition in listening, rather than through reading or playing, that generated familiarity.’

He points out a subtle difference between this way of assimilating music and the ways in which we experience the other arts.

‘Unlike reading or seeing, listening – based on familiarity through recordings – does not seem to tolerate the encounter with new works... Listeners seem unable to listen the way that people read books and see pictures, judging as they go and willing to enjoy works of a wide range of quality and style. Furthermore, connoisseurship in music still presumes the autonomy of musical meaning; the act of listening is understood normatively as possessing only marginal connections in terms of meaning to words and images.’

Other Arts and the cross-fertilisation of popular culture

But there are also other significant differences between the way in which 20th Century art music developed compared with the literary and visual arts. In these fields there was a fertile interaction between popular culture and mass entertainment on the one hand, and the genres and techniques of high-art traditions on the other. For example, the use of everyday objects, technologies and issues as materials for art-making, is evident in the work of Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein from the 60s and in the more recent work of Cindy Sherman, Jeff Koons and Bill Viola. Popular culture also became an important source for high-art practices in sculpture, film, photography and video art.

In music however, this cross-fertilisation never really happened and the synthesis between popular and art forms all but ceased during the mid-twentieth century. In this respect, art music written after 1945 stands in stark contrast to its own history. The dialectical and reciprocal connections between high-art traditions and popular and folk music, evident in the work of composers from Haydn to Brahms, Liszt, Stravinsky, Bartok, Janacek, Ives and Copeland, were decisively undermined by serialism.

The emphasis on autonomy, structure and independent logic of musical materials created a negative contrast to the successful synthesis in the popular music world between commercial viability and political and social relevance. Popular music was able to assimilate diverse influences and project back a strong political component within an accessible, seemingly international style that cut across class and ethnic divides.

Other reasons for marginality

While the above factors have contributed significantly to the marginalisation of art music in post-war culture, they do not tell the whole story. The perceived decline in cultural standards and taste in late-twentieth-century mass society has often been cited as one key reason. In the UK, the pro-modernist institutional policy of the BBC in the 1960s is often cited as another.

Whatever the reasons, when we get to the 1970s and 80s, contemporary concert music has become peripheral to musical life – ghettoised for the benefit of the silent minority.

However, things are slowly but surely changing.

The return of the performer/composer

In recent years the performer/composer has started to make a comeback, particularly within the context of improvised music. This has come about partly through changes in music education and partly through the breakdown of cultural hierarchies. There has also been a marked increase in devised work, where the roles of composer, director and performer have become blurred. (For example, Peter Weigold's work with Notes Inegales and Matthew Barley's work with Between the Notes.) The re-creative virtuosity that has dominated instrumental teaching in the 20th century is gradually being replaced by a return to the creative virtuosity that was favoured up until the end of the 19th century. The creative virtuosity that has always been at the centre of jazz and popular music composition is gradually making its way back into concert music composition.

Recently, when talking about improvised Indian music on Radio 3, Harrison Birtwistle said:

'If I was a weather forecaster, I would say that this sort of strategy is the future of music - elements which are improvised within music that is very carefully structured; rhythmically complex, a degree of complexity that can only be achieved by something which is not written down. In my art we have split the atom as far as rhythm is

concerned. You can't go any further in the complexity; it's a complexity that I don't think can be heard any more.'

Guitar

The re-emergence of the composer/performer and the increase of the performance of collaborative, devised and improvised music (within certain performing canons) are contributing to a more integrated dialogue between contemporary and historical repertoire. Perhaps this is nowhere more visible than in the classical guitar world.

In the last 15 to 20 years, a paradigmatic shift has occurred, away from new music tokenism towards a situation where music written in the last 50 years dominates guitar recital programmes.

Repertoire surveyed from 34 concerts given in 6 European guitar festivals in 2004 and 2005 shows a dominance of new repertoire:

58% post 1950

23% 1900-1950

19% pre 1900

This dominance is also reflected in classical guitar recordings, where soloists routinely release whole CDs of new music rather than historical repertoire.

There are many reasons for this trend. Among them are:

- The rise of the composer/performer (Leo Brouwer, Dusan Bogdanovic, and Roland Dyens) supplementing the commissioning soloist (Segovia and Bream)
- The improvising culture of guitar learning
- Guitarists' willingness to collaborate creatively and pro-actively

- The plurality of styles associated with the guitar and their cross fertilisation (particularly from mainstream popular culture)
- The fragility and artificiality of the guitar's classical tradition
The canonisation of the guitar repertoire that took place in the 20th century was driven by a desire for acceptance into the serious musical mainstream. The resultant, obsessive lust for great music led guitarists to colonise the lute and vihuela repertoires and to invade the musical territory of the keyboard player. It is perhaps unsurprising that this chimera has decayed with time.
- The sharing of repertoire of touring soloists at international guitar festivals.
This is not to be underestimated. Most touring soloists attend several festivals each year. Apart from looking for new repertoire for their own programmes, they teach at conservatoires and influence their students' choice of repertoire.
- Festivals and organisations like the IGF commissioning new work

What now for the guitar?

So, what next for the guitar? Perhaps some of the most interesting work going on in guitar scholarship these days is research into the collaborative process. Two recent doctoral theses examine this area in some detail – Dr Jonathan Leathwood (University of Denver, Colorado) Dr Stefan Osterjo (Lund University, Sweden).

Many of the landmarks in the guitar's modern repertoire are the result of a collaboration with an influential performer, whose fingerprints may usually be discerned in the published edition. The editions made by Andrés Segovia of the works written for him, for instance, contain a number of idiosyncrasies that dissatisfy many guitarists of the present day. What to do, then, when a search for the 'original' turns up only a draft, full of impracticalities and guesswork? The guitar's major repertoire of the last hundred years is dominated by unstable texts, as more and more manuscripts are coming to light that show works in various stages of revision.

Guitarists may have to become used to placing themselves into something resembling the collaborative space in order to engage critically with their repertoire. At present, we are only just beginning to gather materials. Understanding them may soon become the most urgent question in guitar scholarship.

Jonathan Leathwood suggests that:

‘Perhaps true collaboration works *towards* an ‘original’ version rather than away from one. Many of the best collaborative performers are composers *manqués*. It may well be that any score is not only a poor translation of a composer’s ideas, but also something incomplete. The composer’s initial text may not take the form of an imaginary performance but something slightly more abstract: something that only comes to life in performance. In that case the performer/collaborator has the job not only of interpreting, but also of completing the composition.’

Conclusion

So, 60 years on from the Festival of Britain, I see the relationship between new music and guitar to be a very healthy one. New guitar music is frequently welcomed into the general concert repertoire, rather than simply satisfying a novelty slot on a concert programme. When guitarists commission a new piece, it’s not unusual for them to perform the piece in most, if not all, of their concerts in a season. Examples of surprisingly recent works that seem to have been part of the standard repertoire forever include Takemitsu’s *All in Twilight*, Roland Dyens’ *Tango en Skai*, the Ginastera Sonata, Walton’s Bagatelles, and Brouwer’s *El Decameron Negro*.

The re-emergence of the composer/performer and close collaborative work between performers and mainstream and emerging composers is maintaining a healthy balance between new music and old music in the guitar repertoire.

Instead of the guitar apologetically lagging behind the more ‘illustrious’ instruments (such as violin, cello, and piano), this is one area where we are taking the lead.

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