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Annelies Fryberger

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Transculturality and New Music: Terms and Context

Annelies Fryberger

Symposium: Establishing Transcultural New Music - bridging a gap or re-inventing exoticism?
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This presentation started out with a very different tone, but then Trump was elected, and suddenly the notion of Transcultural New Music felt urgent to me in a way that it hadn't before. New music, at least in France and the US, the countries I have studied most, struggles to be inclusive – I will reserve my judgment regarding Germany, because I'm still getting to know the scene here. The patriarchy is still alive and well in New Music – think of its patrilineal teacher-student family trees, or the fact that positions of power are in the hands of white men almost exclusively. Minorities, be they composers from non-Western countries, women, or racial minorities, are minimally represented within it. This is not to say that composers are not open to other cultures – they are, sometimes to an extreme degree. Pulling in influence from non-Western cultures or other media cultures (visual arts, other performing arts) has been a major part of New Music innovations for the better part of the 20th century. This is indeed a good strategy, as sociological research on networks has taught us: avant-garde movements need tight, small networks to take hold – think of the composers circulating around Darmstadt, or cliques that bonded around certain teachers – but once the movement is established, it needs outside influence to continue to innovate. This is the most basic lesson that network studies have to teach us about avant-garde movements. Thus, many of the major innovations in new music have come from the use of elements brought in from beyond the Western World – think, for example, of John Cage's prepared piano, which was initially an attempt to replace a percussion ensemble with an African “inflection,” as per the request of the commissioner, or the influence of Simha

Arom's ethnomusicological work on Ligeti and Steve Reich, among many others, Luigi Nono's use of Brazilian drumming patterns, or the way "westernized" non-Western composers turn to their native cultures for inspiration – think of Saed Haddad or Toru Takemitsu. I would argue that transculturality is part of the very DNA of new music, when you look at its patterns of innovation. But when you look at who is present in programming, in audiences, in ensembles, in decision-making bodies, we are very far from any kind of transcultural utopia – and I'm guessing this is also the case in Germany, because otherwise this conference would be unnecessary.

I have spent the last 4 years looking at structures of peer review in New Music in France and the United States – meaning juries of composers and other members of the New Music world (presenters, musicians, etc.) whose job is to determine who gets commissions or other funding. This work has led me to look at how exclusion can and does happen, and what features of an 'autonomous' (I'll come back to that term) art field make it difficult for some to access its institutions. And this suddenly feels urgent and terrifying in ways that it didn't before, because frankly, if a field like this one, where curiosity, originality, exploration, and innovation are bywords, if even a field like this cannot be open to voices that sound differently or people with backgrounds dissimilar to the canonized vision of the Western composer, then I do not see how we can expect our politicians or fellow citizens to do any better.

I should start out by saying that the organizations I studied – New Music USA in the US, which is the biggest funder of New Music in the US, and whose mission is solely the support of New Music, and the Ministry for Culture in France, specifically its commissioning system for new music composers – these two organizations are not primarily preoccupied with encouraging diversity in new music. What they will tell you is that their primary preoccupation is quality, with diversity sometimes being a mark of quality, but the inverse is not

necessarily true. How does one determine quality in a setting like New Music, where originality and self-expression is the dogma? In practical terms, the New Music field is set up such that it is autonomous – this means that judgments of quality come from within, not from without. A legitimate opinion on the quality of new music production comes necessarily from actors within the new music field – outside judgments do not have the power to make or break careers.

This means that it is peers who are called on to judge the work of other composers. How does this work? How do they identify a good idea, or an original idea, in this context? It is at this point that I want to look at how sociologists have studied artistic creativity, and more specifically the role of networks in creativity. Creativity circulates in networks, for example, the “creative peaks” of painters typically come during their association with artistic movements (Accominotti 2009). To come back to the point regarding networks that I already mentioned, the literature on creativity and networks indicates two things: 1) a closed network is important for support, especially in avant-garde circles (Bottero et Crossley 2011), in other words, counter-cultural or counter-aesthetic movements take hold in tight networks; and 2) innovation and originality are easier accessed by tapping into networks outside one’s own – meaning, once an aesthetic movement is established, further innovation comes easier when one looks outside this network. Those who act as brokers, bringing in information from external networks, are typically rewarded and seen as having good ideas within their home networks (Burt 2004). The people who provide links between networks which otherwise have little contact benefit from doing so. Closed networks are characterized by a high level of homogeneity of information, and therefore information about alternative ways of thinking and behaving comes from more distant networks.

Perhaps you see where I’m going with this – composers often use techniques or ideas from cultural or musical contexts outside their own, and this type of

research is typically rewarded. The recent premiere at Donaueschingen of Klaus Schedl's piece using heavy metal vocal techniques would also be an example of this. In this sense, transculturality is used to fuel innovation processes in European avant-garde networks, which were and are indeed closed and need outside ideas in order not to stagnate. The people who bring these ideas and adapt them to the new music context have been and are rewarded for this brokerage work. I want to point out before I move on, however, that this works best for individuals who have already carved out a space for themselves in the field – it is more difficult for those who position themselves between networks right from the beginning, as we shall see later.

So that's one aspect: recontextualizing or exploiting, depends on your perspective, elements from other cultures can be beneficial and rewarded in new music circles. But the examples I've given so far are of people who were already established to some degree before they started exploring elsewhere. And I'm still describing a world that I started out calling a patriarchy with inclusiveness issues. So, if it's such a wonderful thing to be able to bring inspiration from the outside, why isn't "the other" actually more present in new music?

To answer this question, in light of my past research, I want to share two concrete observations from my fieldwork. The first is a fairly clear cut example of injustice: the French ministry for Culture, in the commissions it gives to composers, has categories for jazz musicians and "traditional musics," in addition to the "classical" categories of opera, symphonic works, chamber works, etc. This means that every year, a small percentage of commissions are given to musicians who are not in what would typically be seen as new music networks. The jury which makes these decisions is made up of 13 people, at least 6 of which are composers who have formerly received one of these commissions themselves. Most of them are new music composers, working in the classical tradition, but there is typically at least one jazz musician among

them. However, the composers who fall into the “traditional musics” category are NEVER called on to be part of this jury – they are not considered peers, and do not have their place in this “peer review” setting. This is a very clear mechanism of exclusion. To add insult to injury, the Ministry benefits from being seen as supporting other musics – this is seen very favorably in today’s context where elitism is seen in a negative light –, all the while maintaining a strict separation between music of the “other” and “legitimate,” high-brow production. This situation also clearly states that the opinion of musicians who fall into the “traditional” category is not legitimate in the evaluation of new music. This actually calls into question the very nature of the use of expertise – these jury members are called on to evaluate the work of their peers because they are considered to be the best qualified to do so – but no one on the jury has the appropriate expertise to evaluate applications from musicians working in a so-called “traditional” vein, and so this category is inevitably marginalized by the jury members, without anyone there to speak for it. It is easy to see how this further entrenches these categories, and keeps these musicians from gaining legitimacy in the new music world – and makes it difficult for these networks to come into contact with each other. Because, in addition to being an important moment for deciding how this public funding should be spent, these juries are an important social setting, as the jury spends a full week together evaluating applications: contacts are made, networks are built and reinforced, and the status of “gatekeeper” is bestowed on those individuals who are called on to participate (I would add that their names are made public, so this status is communicated directly to the new music community). This is a rather obvious problem and something that could be fixed easily if that was in fact their desire – but I am not optimistic. I share this example because this is something I see time and again – structures that look diverse from the outside, but when you look at who is making decisions, you realize that the voices being heard in decision-making processes are far from diverse.

A second example I would like to look at is transmedia or new media work, sound art, sound installation, *klangkunst*, or any of these various “uncategorizable” types of production (the critic Stefan Fricke described sound art as being “*zwischen zwei Stühle*” in a recent issue of *Musiktexte*¹). We’re now looking at a case which intuitively, based on what I have said previously about brokerage work and bringing influence from distant networks, would seem to be evaluated favorably in this context. But in actual fact, composers who position themselves from the beginning, intentionally or not, between art forms or cultures, typically have a harder road to travel on the way to legitimacy in the new music world. I saw time and again how juries struggled to evaluate this type of work, and many people pointed out that the traditional application process puts this type of production at a disadvantage in a selection committee. The good news is that both the organizations that I studied took note of this, and made changes to their selection process to remedy this problem. NMUSA changed their application entirely, making it possible for composers to submit many different types of media to support their applications, while the Ministry for Culture in France created a separate category for sound installations. When these changes were made, an unexpected consequence was a jump in the number of women who received funding – both of these organizations previously funded strikingly low percentages of female composers (the American organization faring slightly better in this regard). In fact, the ‘sound installation’ category for the Ministry of Culture is the only category where female composers are over-represented, to the point of being a strong majority. The other categories never go beyond 20% women, and most never reach that figure. What is happening here?

Network research in other project-based artistic fields shows that women benefit more from diverse networks (meaning, weak ties to multiple networks) than

¹ “Klangkünstler, also jene Leute, die zwischen den artistischen Stühlen sitzen...” (Fricke 2015, 15).

from membership in one cohesive, institutionalized network (Lutter 2015). Cohesive networks tend to inhibit women's progress, whereas sound art forces composers to develop collaborative networks that are more diverse than those of composers whose work does not cross disciplinary boundaries. In tight, cohesive networks, information flows tend to be redundant, and this hurts women, for the simple reason that their tight networks tend to include more women and have fewer ties to influential people (who are primarily men) (Lutter 2015, 331). To understand this best, we have to remember, with Howard Becker (1982), that an aesthetic is a social world. A host of individuals work to make an aesthetic, or a compositional school, exist within the field of new music – ensembles, festivals, funding bodies, composers, etc. Some aesthetics are present in relatively closed networks, which means that the composers writing in this school tend to work with the same ensembles and producers repeatedly. An example of this would be the beginnings of the spectral school in France: at the beginning, these composers were supported tremendously by the work of the Ensemble Itinéraire, before this movement became more mainstream. Another example would be the circulation of the new complexity school (both of these examples show compositional schools that were almost exclusively masculine at their beginnings). Thus, when one subscribes to an aesthetic or a compositional school, one also joins a social world. The implication is that female composers benefit less than men from explicitly adhering to an aesthetic, and would do better to diversify their disciplinary and social affiliations.

NMUSA and the Ministry for Culture did not intend to exclude sound art or make it difficult to evaluate. But since this was actually the case until they made changes – in 2008 in France, in 2013 in the US, these institutions unwittingly reinforced mechanisms of gender inequality in the new music world. When they changed their evaluation to better account for sound art, they also delicately moved the balance in favor of greater gender equality – even though this was not

the intended goal. What I'm trying to show you is that inequality has many sources, and musical sub-genres are not treated equally, and therefore the people working within them also suffer. This inevitably has implications for the subject of Transcultural new music, to which I will now turn specifically.

I want to look specifically at the term 'Transcultural' which brings us together here today. Culture, in anthropologist Arjun Appadurai's work on the cultural dimensions of globalization, is a process (Appadurai 1996). Culture is a process of differentiation – in Appadurai's definition, it is the subset of differences which are naturalized to articulate a boundary of difference or group identity (*Ibid*, 15). If we adopt this line of thinking, transcultural would mean that we are seeking ties between two processes of differentiation, which normally should be antagonistic, as in they would push against each other and define themselves in opposition to each other. In this sense, their differences would become stronger through their interaction. The case of Toru Takemitsu is illustrative, and here I quote Harm Langenkamp's work on intercultural composition: "the contradictions [Takemitsu] experienced between Japan, the West, and his own life led him to feel that he should not solve them, but 'confront' them, even intensify them" (Langenkamp 2011, 186). For Takemitsu, this antagonism is clearly productive. And this kind of antagonism points potentially to an ideal-typical form of collaboration that transcultural new music might strive for.

In Georgina Born's work on interdisciplinarity (Born 2010), she describes three ideal-typical models of interdisciplinarity which she observes in academia – the so-called "synthesis" model, the "subordination-service" model, and the "agonistic-antagonistic" model. In its current form, collaborations in new music of a transcultural nature typically mimic the "subordination-service" model of interdisciplinarity, one in which the "service" discipline (non-Western musics) "fills in for an absence or lack in the other, (master) discipline" (New Music). At best, what transcultural new music could hope for is an agonistic-antagonistic

form of collaboration, one in which “interdisciplinarity springs from a self-conscious dialogue with, criticism of, or opposition to, the intellectual, aesthetic, ethical, or political limits of established disciplines” (*Ibid*, 211). This does not mean that relations between the disciplines are overtly conflictual, rather, “this kind of interdisciplinary practice stems from a commitment or desire to contest or transcend the given epistemological and ontological foundations of historical disciplines” (*Ibid*).

If one were to adopt this model for transcultural new music, it implies respect for both parties and a benefit from the tension produced by the encounter, without synthesis being the aim. This all sounds well and good when we’re discussing aesthetics, but given that, as I have already said, an aesthetic is also, if not firstly, a social world, this implies that we are confronting not just different musical visions, but also different visions of the role of music in society, the place of the composer or the musician in society, their relationship to their audiences, different structures of the musical worlds that are being confronted (new music being a world of specialists), differing economic models that are seen as appropriate for their support, differing ways of talking about the music – or a difference in whether talking about music is useful in the first place! If these aspects are not also part of this dialogue, and if this dialogue is not just taking place between musicians, but also and most importantly within decision-making bodies, then we are going to continue in the service-subordination model, with all that that implies for our societies. The arts and humanities are increasingly called on to justify their existence in today’s world of STEM curricula and the like, and if we were to close with the thoughts of none other than the problematic voice of Edward Said, again through the reading of Harm Langenkamp, the basic mission of the arts and humanities is indeed to raise awareness of the fact that “not a single voice (or: identity) is a pure given but [rather] a hybrid construct, the result of an intricate interplay in which voices

continuously challenge, cross[,] and influence each other” (Langenkamp 2007, 10). The most basic role of the humanities is “the preservation of difference, without, at the same time, sinking into a desire to dominate” (Edward Said, quoted in *Ibid.*).

So now we know why we’re here. Thank you for your attention.

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