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The composer as evaluator: reflections on evaluation and the creative process.

Annelies Fryberger

Tracking the Creative Process in Music, Oct 8-10 2015, Paris, France

In an autonomous field (Bourdieu 1998) such as that of contemporary music – new music – it is the creators themselves who are called on to evaluate the work of their peers. This evaluative work is also familiar to academics, who are accustomed to a system of peer review, and has been the subject of sociological study¹. However, the interaction between this evaluative work and the creative process itself has not been investigated. What we're going to do today is look at how the creative identity of an individual is forged in part by the evaluative work he or she accomplishes in formal settings: juries and committees – this is far from the only setting for evaluation, but for reasons of time, I am going to focus only on formal, confidential evaluation organized by institutionalized funding bodies. As such, I am situating the creative process – the genesis of an artistic work – in a broader, social process: that of the development of an artistic singularity and subjectivity. It is this process, the development of a creative individual, which will occupy our attention here, with the works themselves being seen as manifestations of this larger process. As you will see, this will call us to look specifically at the role of networks in composers' career trajectories and in their development as creative individuals.

The current evaluative subjectivity of composers is of course a product of a specific context: according to Yves Gingras, academia has used some form of peer review since research was institutionalized in the 17th century (Gingras 2014), but the wide-spread use of peer review, and specifically quantifiable evaluation, at all levels of academia is a phenomenon of the late-20th century. New music has been swept up in this evaluative culture, with informal systems of peer review becoming increasingly formalized in the late 20th century. These systems differ from one organization to another and no official efforts have been made to harmonize them, as has been the case in academia with quantifiable bibliometric measures (citation indexes, impact factors, etc.). Devices such as reputation indexes and the like, present in the visual arts, have not been developed in new music, probably because new music does not have a secondary market where significant profits can be made. So despite the obvious differences that new music presents when compared to fields such as academia or the visual arts, the evaluation of new music production is nonetheless affected by trends present in these areas. Indeed, the one trend that is clearly present is a tendency toward quantifiable evaluation systems – composers are increasingly called on to numerically score different aspects of the work of their peers, e.g. artistic merit, career, craftsmanship, value of the performance at hand, etc. This allows the funding organization to create an “objective” ranked list of candidates in order to make and defend their funding decisions. Objectivity is indeed the goal, to put an end to the image of a ‘boys club’ which takes care of its own – which is also the way peer review was previously seen in academia (Gingras 2014).

¹ For example: Lamont (2009), Gingras (2014; 2008), and (Musselin 2005).

I will draw on two panel discussions I was able to observe, in 2012 and 2013, within the organization New Music USA - based in New York City, the biggest funder of new music in the US. Each panel of 3 composers was recruited by the organization to select approximately 25 grantees from an applicant pool of 70 composers. The members scored the applications before meeting, and during the meeting they discussed their scores to come up with a ranked list – the top 25 would receive funding, the others not. In addition, I will use material from 20 interviews conducted with composers who have served as panelists for New Music USA or on the jury for the French state-funded commissions (*Commandes d'Etat*, now known as *Aides à l'écriture*) to draw more general conclusions about evaluation and the creative process.

One thing that is immediately clear is that some people are better at evaluating the work of their peers than others – some are able to articulate their judgments and argue their point of view convincingly, others have difficulties verbalizing their feelings about the music of their peers and end up sticking to relatively banal statements like “I didn’t like his music” or “the style didn’t appeal to me.” This observation would seem rather innocent – indeed, why should a composer’s ability to evaluate her peers in a collective setting matter? But the fact is, given the way this art world is currently structured, the ability to participate productively in this type of conversation is an important tool for building a career. Networking opportunities present themselves between panelists and within the field of applicants – several composers spoke to me of having discovered people doing work that interested them amongst the applicants, and subsequently promoted their music elsewhere or initiated collaborations with them. Other key information is shared: the relative prominence of ensembles, curators, festivals, venues, and institutions, and who is promoting what type of aesthetic. A lot of work is being done in these panels that is not simply about deciding who gets funding and who doesn’t. In other words, being an effective panelist gives one access to information that is otherwise hard to come by. These panels provide a concrete platform for contemporary music’s gift economy: one “wherein exchange is not mediated through price, immediate reciprocation, or other key aspects of market economies” (Craig 2007: 259). All the panelists are recruited from the pool of previous laureates, and all the interviewees stated that they agreed to participate in the panel because they wanted to give back to the organization or to the field as a whole.

Let’s bring this analysis up to a more general level: “weak ties” (Granovetter 1973) are links between relatively closed networks – networks that otherwise do not come into contact with each other. These links can be beneficial for the person who provides the link; Ronald S. Burt (2004) purports that career advancement is aided by obtaining information from outside one’s closed network. Closed networks are characterized by a high level of homogeneity of information, and information about alternative ways of thinking and behaving comes from more distant networks. Those individuals (brokers, in Burt’s terminology) who have access to multiple networks are thus able to enhance their social capital, thereby making career advancement easier. The evaluative panels I studied provide an opportunity for an individual to gain information beyond their relatively closed, local network(s), thereby turning them into brokers and increasing their social capital. This is particularly true in the American context, given the way the new music world puddles in specific geographic locations: New York City, the West Coast, Chicago... The opportunity to see beyond one’s local network gives these individuals an advantage in detecting and developing good ideas (Burt 2004: 389).

What constitutes a “good idea” in the field of new music? The answer that emerges from the interviews is fairly intuitive: a “good idea” means an original, creative, or innovative one, as applied to one’s music, or, succinctly put, a distinctive voice as a composer. Creativity circulates in networks, e.g. the “creative peaks” of painters typically come during their association with artistic movements (Accominotti 2009). 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).

These general observations lead us to some more specific ones about the field of contemporary composition: first of all, not all composers use the information they access through these evaluative panels in the same way and not all approach evaluation in the same way. A typology of evaluative subjectivities, related to the creative work of the individuals in question, has emerged from this research. In short, the way you evaluate reflects the way you compose, and vice versa. Three archetypical evaluative subjectivities have emerged from this research. I’m going to call them the improviser, the classical composer, and the network-spanner. A few words on how I developed this typology before we look at these archetypes in more detail: it is primarily drawn from my work observing panels, which I was only able to do in the US, but I nonetheless draw from my interviews in both France and the US to develop some aspects of it. I was able to interview the panelists I observed, and their behavior in the interview matched the patterns I observed in the panel. I also discussed these archetypes with the panel organizers in France and the US, and their observations helped refine this typology. In addition, I used panelist scores (which I only had access to in the US) to further understand this categorization. All this to say that even though I am dealing with a small dataset, I do contend that there are some generalizations to be made.

The first two archetypes are relatively self-explanatory: the improviser has a background in improvised/jazz music, works in collaboration with other improvisers – the collaborative aspect of his work is essential. He tends to participate in evaluative discussions in a very frank way, with straight-shooting expressions of personal preference, and actively engages with the other panelists (asking questions, repeating back other points of view, making jokes, etc.), and he scores the applicants high. Given the collaborative nature of his work, he is able to directly benefit from information gained about other composers doing work similar to his own, notably by contacting candidates for possible future collaborations.

The “classical” composer tends to speak with authority. He tends to speak first – in the two discussions I observed, this person spoke first exactly 65% of the time both in 2012 and 2013 (first, meaning, when the chair asks the panelists for their input on a candidate, he is the person to take the floor first). His opinion is most likely to be adopted – 55% and 46% of the time in

2012 and 2013, respectively (out of discussions where there was disagreement)². His primary interest in the discussion is the relative prominence of different ensembles, venues, festivals, etc. – which is a reflection of his own work in building his career. These composers indeed spend more time in the discussion on these points than the others.

The network-spanner is a less obvious category: this person produces music that is less easy to situate clearly in an identifiable sub-genre of contemporary music, and in the discussion, she acts more as a mediator between the improviser and the classical composer. She (my use of pronouns here is intentional) rarely makes her point of view prevail over the others – only 16% and 17% of the time in 2012 and 2013, respectively, and rarely takes the floor first. Where she stands out, however, is in the number of candidates she knows in some way personally. This would seem to indicate that her networks are somewhat more diverse than the other two, which is also reflected in her more difficult to classify creative production. I realize that I'm working with a very limited sample here, but if my intuition is correct, and these panelists do have more diverse networks, this would confirm network research in other project-based artistic fields which shows that women benefit more from diverse networks (meaning, weak ties to multiple networks) than from membership in one cohesive network (Lutter 2015). Cohesive networks tend to inhibit women's progress, and as such they are forced to use other strategies to move forward. This also means that these panelists potentially stand to benefit most from the information gathered in the panel, as they are least bound to a closed network. In this light, let us look at the following quote, taken from an informal discussion on a blog, from the composer Liza Lim on her non-affiliation with the "New Complexity" school:

I've never been that interested in joining a club[,] but I do recognise [...] the way lineages for artistic achievement are typically understood through 'patrilineal' transmission. I find the way certain terms pop up [...] quite interesting – the comments about 'purity' in particular[,] because that speaks to the gatekeeping function of lineages which seek to protect the work of the progenitor from contamination from applications and appropriations that stray too far away. Then of course there's the weird relation that occurs if a woman seeks to be legitimised through a male innovator in order to be accepted in a 'canon' – those things read rather negatively (I think) for a female artist in ways which they simply don't for a male artist. [...] I remember feeling astonished hearing Hector Parra [speak] and [...] the ease with which he situated himself in relation to Ferneyhough and Harvey's work[,] and claimed his place within their legacies[. I remember] thinking that that would be quite an alien thing for me to do. That is not a criticism of Hector at all[,] but it did strike me [...] as a point of difference that was highly gendered³.

In this quote, Lim points to the fact that she sees a gendered split in how composers self-identify as part of artistic movements. The hesitation she expresses perfectly mirrors the findings of Mark Lutter (2015), in particular, who convincingly shows that women must develop diverse networks in order to succeed and that adherence to a closed network can be actively destructive for their career, while the opposite is true for men. Lim's choice not to "join a club," in her words, in this case the all-male New Complexity club, is a reflection of her intuitive understanding that this would not be a wise move.

² These figures reflect who initially presented the idea that eventually got adopted by the panel when a consensus was not present.

³ Extracted from a comment to Rutherford-Johnson (2015).

An interesting counterpoint can be found in sound art: much of this work involves cross-disciplinary collaborations, which force the composer to tap into or develop networks that extend outside of new music. Women are astonishingly visible in this field, even though they This is not a new form of production today⁴, but it is increasing in scale with the advent of the internet, and is experiencing a wave of institutionalization, primarily in museums – institutions that previously had little to do with contemporary music outside of being an occasional performance venue⁵. Funding organizations for contemporary music are starting to take note: in the panel discussions I observed, in both 2012 and 2013, sound installation work did not successfully make it through the panel process, and panelists noted in both years that the application process itself made it very difficult to evaluate this type of work. Changes have been made subsequently in the application process in part to remedy this problem. The Ministry for Culture in France must have noticed something similar, because, in 2008, “sound installation” was added as a separate category for the *commandes d’Etat* – which means that efforts are now made to recruit panelists who have the expertise necessary to evaluate sound installation applications. Now, here’s the interesting part: women are not in the majority in this type of production – if we take the list of sound artists Wikipedia provides to be representative (« List of Sound Artists » 2015), 20% of the artists listed are women. This matches the gender split to be found generally in new music, where the figure stands at somewhere between 15 and 25%. It is striking, then, that the Ministry for Culture has awarded fully 63% of its grants for sound installation to women since the category was created in 2008. Compare this to the symphonic works category, where women represent 7% of the grantees over that period. Indeed, sound installation is the only category where women are overrepresented in the *Commandes d’Etat*, and I would argue that this is a reflection of how women are more successful in diverse networks whose composition is less rigid than in cohesive, institutionalized networks.

Conclusions: what happens in an evaluation panel discussion?

All the composers interviewed, regardless of aesthetic orientation or their place in this typology of evaluative subjectivities, indicated that it was useful to get an overview of the French or American contemporary music scene as a whole – let us look at why exactly.

Originality is indeed an important criterion for judging contemporary music, but it must be clear that this criterion is itself situated in time and space. It was in the 19th century that originality became a key criterion for evaluating works of art: “the ultimate aim of art changed: the point was no longer to match a definition of beauty or the sacred, but rather to judge the work according to the laws of the singular vision [of the artist]” (Carron 2011 : 160, our translation). In the panels observed, the originality criterion was applied differently depending on the age of the candidate – younger composers were forgiven for writing music that was not terribly

⁴ Its historical precedents include, e.g., Stockhausen’s *Musik für ein Haus*, John Cage’s happenings, the work of Alvin Lucier, experiments in *Musique concrète*, acoustic ecology...

⁵ A clear manifestation of this was the exhibition *Soundings*, hosted by the Museum of Modern Art in New York City in 2013, which was certainly the first exhibition on that level of sound installation work, although it does have a historical precedent with the exhibition of the Baschet brothers sound sculptures in the 1960s (Museum of Modern Art 1965).

original, or which did not show evidence of a distinctive voice, whereas older composers were judged very harshly for this. This shows that there is an implicit understanding that part of becoming a composer is learning about the field, learning what others are doing and finding one's niche within that. The evaluation process is a prime opportunity to do just that – it gives these individuals a rare opportunity to have an overview of the field, which can be used to do just what they are asking of the composers they evaluate: find their distinctive voice in the field. An aesthetic is a social world (Becker 1982), and the process of forging a distinct creative identity is a network-based one (who you know affects how you create), dependent on the resources and conventions which circulate within networks (Becker 1982). This is really the core of my argument: to understand how evaluative practices affect the creative process, we have to situate the genesis of artistic works within a larger process of development of a creative individual, which is an inherently social process. We must acknowledge that “individual creativity is not [...] fixed, but rather depends on interactions between artists” (Accominotti 2009: 286). This leads me to propose a view of the development of a creative individual as a process of accumulation of creative capital (information on work of others), social capital (access to networks, collaborations), and symbolic capital (acting as expert, gatekeeper), which gives one the ability to occupy a position in the field of new music (Bourdieu 1998). Movement within networks and between them is in part organized through the peer review system present in the field of new music, and there is a gendered difference in the way composers use these networks, which affects how their production is classified, which gives them access to different resources, and *in fine* affects their development as a creative individual. Indeed, when we throw gender into this analytical mix, it gives a much clearer picture of how these networks operate and how they are used to shape creative identities. What I have tried to illustrate here is just one aspect of this social process of the development of creative individuals, as organized through institutionalized peer review systems – which are a particularly rich space for observing the effects of networks and the sociality of creativity.

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