

***“Careerism and Chance Music: A Proposal,”* EAR [Jan/Feb 1979]**

The other day, I saw a score of a “composition” which consisted of a collection of squiggly lines more or less resembling the cross-section of a tree stump. Directions for the realization of the stump included specific instrumentation, dynamics, and a general description of the emotional quality to be projected by sounds made in performance. The informality of this score is by no means unique among the documents of “works” created in the last fifteen years or so.

It does not trouble me that a suggestive doodle might be the sole documentation of a musical performance. Indeed, pieces of music are, in the final analysis, only something heard; they do not require printed or written justification.

What does trouble me is the opportunism of the doodler who characterizes, or permits characterization of, the heard result as “his” or “her” work. Surely a piece is a joint composition when most, or even, many parameters are left unspecified. Of course the doodler risks bad performances, but these are no more his or her responsibility than good ones. It is immoral for the doodler to take credit for the latter and to blame the performers for the former.

In a less fluid socio-economic context such as that which pertained, say, fifty years ago, when publicity was not so powerful a tool and when educated listeners still had access to a few aesthetic and technical standards which permitted them to know good music from bad, professional wheeler-dealers could not hide the paucity of their talent behind a smokescreen of personality. Today, in the absence of standards, an oft-seen face quickly becomes important---even “great.”

There are probably too many composers in the world for the number of posts, grants, commissions, performers, and students available. Certainly, many composers of my acquaintance find it difficult to meet the main necessity of their daily lives: to get their music played. One sad reason for this is that performers do not play much new music. The new music which is played tends to be the work of a fairly small number of oft-seen faces because the audience assumes that such work is the most important work being done.

When not playing “important” new works, performers usually opt for easy new works. One understands the economic logic in saving rehearsal time for the older Masterworks: an audience often knows the rules for these, will judge the performers on their renderings of these, and will return to subsequent performances if these are satisfactorily presented. All new works, even those by “important” (or important) composers will be received with mild disdain; therefore, why not program doodles?

Well-known apologists for Doodle Music have asserted that doodling “frees” the music from “the tyranny of the ego.” Why, then, can we not free the career of the

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music from the career of its agent, the doodling composer? There is no aesthetic consistency in demanding humility of the music while personally maintaining a Wagnerian posture. Fame and wealth are goals of the Romantic egotist, not of the Zen Master. In China, music comes anonymously before the public and enjoys a happy life. The Chinese composers are content to work in committees; theirs is a consistent moral aesthetic.

When naming and advertising my own Chance Works, I have preferred the terms “format” and “stimulus” to “composition.” I have sought to inform the audience of what controls I have exercised over the performers, and in what manner the latter are free to contribute their own ideas and feelings to the performance. Naturally, comprehensive program notes are desirable here, but it is surprising how much important information can be conveyed by an open, honest, anti-Wagnerian title.

If, for example, we can assume, whenever we see the word “format” that nothing is specified save that which is mentioned in the title---how much simpler our relationship with an audience becomes. And, how much simpler our relationship with our self!

Adopting a program and liner note typographic format, like that used for film credits, with a linear ordering of names generated by the alphabet, and the erstwhile “composer” being credited solely with having provided the “control concept,” is both healthy and informative. It is astonishing what a liberating effect dispensing with the small, implicit lie of the usual “composer’s-name-in-large-print-on-the-right-margin, followed-by-his-birthdate-in-parentheses, while-the-performers’-names-lurk-beneath-the-title-in-small-print” layout can have on the creator of the doodle stimulus. It is his or her public affirmation that he (she) has nothing to hide, that he has freed music, and that he competes with no one.”