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Why Haven't I Written About the Pieces Played at ICMC?

Leigh Landy

It had to happen sooner or later. It happened at ICMC 2004 in Miami. Margaret Schedel, editor of *Array*, approached me during a meal sliced thinly among the numerous events that make up an ICMC and made a request that I review one of the following day's concerts for this publication. I like Meg terribly, so my negative response was rather out of character. She persevered and deserved to succeed, having worked with me so closely on recent collaboration issues for the journal I edit, *Organised Sound*. However, there are moments when integrity takes over and kindness has to take second place.

So what is this rant all about? It all starts with the years and years of ICMC reviews read in ICMA publications, and even in *Computer Music Journal*. I shall comment about these presently, but before doing so, there's something else that needs to be discussed, and that is the question of whether after-the-fact reviews of one-off events serve much of any purpose at all. I personally don't think so, and have therefore not earned

a reasonable amount of money, having chosen not to review dozens of events for a significant number of newspapers, journals and newsletters throughout the years. Why have I not done this? The answer is simple. Unless the reader is able to be encouraged to hear the piece(s) of music in question after reading the review, what's the point?

The French music critic Maurice Fleuret is known to have called the late twentieth century the Kleenex Era, i.e., use (perform) a piece once and throw it away. I've written on occasion that the unfortunate result of this notion is that many a work's *première* is also its *dernière*. This sad if not ridiculous fact is even more ridiculous when one takes into account that a great deal of new music deserves to be heard a number of times for a listener to gain a reasonable amount of understanding of what the piece involves, what it communicates and so on. You, the reader, may now complain: what's the point in performing a one-off piece in the first place? I (virtually) blanche and have little to reply. Any Friedman-influenced economist can tell you that the effort that goes into the creation of a new work is hardly "economically" sound if it is only performed once or a few times. I would suggest that in such cases, what goes into a work's creation and what comes out do not add up to the artistic equivalent of black ink.

You may now suggest that with our current ability to offer our music in the form of downloads, CDs and so on, why worry about the one-off concert? This, again, is a valid argument. Still, the constitution of the ICMA does not yet include a paragraph suggesting that a work that has been accepted for performance should, by definition, be placed on that year's ICMC website or the ICMA's own site. Therefore, the further distribution of the work in question is up to the artists themselves. There are exceptions, and the ICMC 2004 DVD included more works than I remembered ever being distributed. These, indeed, could have been reviewed.

But before moving on, although there isn't too far to go anymore, there's the story I interrupted a few paragraphs ago. This story concerned reviews I've read describing ICMC concerts. With very few exceptions, these reviews could be placed in a bundle entitled "Essays in Mutual Back Patting" or some such. The ICMC is not as evil as some festivals I have had the pleasure to attend, where most face-to-face discourse is warm and encouraging, but a good deal of behind-the-back talk is rather different. There is some of that at ICMCs, too, of course. What typifies an ICMC review are the following:

- An attempt to find at least something worth praising in a work, as the author is also a "computer musician" (whatever

that may be)—in any event, someone working in a similar context and therefore someone who understands the lonely, detached cultural role of the person or people involved in the work being reviewed. This type of understanding is totally praiseworthy; nevertheless, these reviews do tend to leave a great deal of space for reading between the lines concerning issues that one has decided not to discuss.

- A tendency exists in these reviews to describe things from a fairly technical point of view, as this is what brought the ICMC people together in the first place. Again, this makes total sense, but has little to do with the success or failure of aesthetics, one of the key roles of a music review throughout the ages.
- In consequence, and given the fact that the review writer will probably not be provided with adequate time to have a long chat with all artists involved in the review, there is hardly any attention provided in terms of what I call the "dramaturgy of music," including a composer's vision, the "why" of a work, what is intended to be communicated (if the composer is able to articulate this) and so on. Please note that there is a maximum word count for the concert programme in the ICMC concert booklet that more or less disallows this aspect of a work to be adequately introduced beforehand.

So where does this leave us? My response to all of those newspapers, journals and newsletters has been: if you want me to write something about the event, why not

allow me to do it beforehand and publish it before the event as well? This implies that I might be able to find out (much) more about the works in question. It also means that I might get to know the music better through its recorded version (if relevant) or through rehearsals. Last but not least, it allows the listeners a chance to be provided with a good deal of information before the fact to either accept or reject, facilitating intelligent discussion of the pros and cons of the work afterwards. Indeed, such announcements do run the risk of alienating a potential public (although not at the ICMC), or at least placing expectation into their ears. So perhaps here, too, there's something wrong. I see a role of facilitation in such articles, as they can enable potential listeners to make an educated choice about attending an event. With this in mind, I would opt to write up works or events that I personally support. This in no way means that I am against controversy or against negative reviews. Still, at the end of this Kleenex Era, we should find means of support for cultural events.

Where, then, is there a place for negative comment? The answer to this in terms of the ICMC is obvious. First of all, it will inevitably take place in the corridors and the bars of that conference. The average IQ of those present goes hand in hand with an ability to dislike works that don't agree with anyone in attendance and

articulate why this is so. The same holds true for many events beyond the ICMC. Furthermore, where there are repeated performances, where there is a relevant accessible document (sound or audio-visual recording), there is every reason to start a debate, as there is every opportunity for that debate to develop.

The ICMC seeks premières, or at least works of very recent vintage. It includes a handful of "works of historic interest" from time to time, e.g. in Berlin. It is unlikely that most *Array* readers will have heard any of the new works unless they were present at the concert in question or have received the work through alternative means (a small minority, methinks). So what's the point of reading a review about a piece that most people are unlikely to be able to hear?

As an ICMA board member, I have spent many an hour at board meetings encouraging a greater ICMA/ICMC music focus. This has many manifestations, most of which fall outside this short discussion article. As long as most composers don't introduce their works properly in an appropriate form (art for art's sake's death is long overdue); as long as many of these composers aren't even present at the event; as long as time isn't set aside for the discussion of musical issues, writing reviews of Kleenex(-like) events serves little purpose.

Although I firmly believe that many of these works deserve praise, what I am more interested in is their being understood and, in consequence, appreciated. The panel I chaired at ICMC 2004 focused on appreciation—something most ICMC artists encounter much too little of. Until we have found a better balance to that “economics” problem introduced above, the place of the post-mortem review is not clear to me. I would prefer to see active musical debate (and distribution) replace the review until the status of appreciation has been improved.

Festival Reviews

Spark Festival of Electronic Music and Art

February 16-20, 2005

University of Minnesota

Brian Kane

Spark 2005, hosted by the University of Minnesota and organized by Douglas Geers, presented a broad array of compositional, conceptual, intellectual and improvisational work in electronic music. Transcending the stylistic and artistic preconceptions that often pigeonhole the vast terrain of electronic music into distinct categories, Spark 2005 presented an exciting, arresting and balanced sampling of recent pieces and research. Spanning four days, the festival included panel discussions; papers on recent research in computer music, technology and aesthetics; concerts of live electroacoustic music, eight-channel tape pieces, multimedia works and improvised sets; installations; lectures and seminars; and demonstrations of new technology.

The keynote artist was composer Philippe Manoury, who lectured on two recent works: *Sound and Fury*,

commissioned by the Chicago Symphony, and *K*, his most recent opera based on Kafka's *The Trial*. The majority of the lecture was devoted to explaining the analogies between Faulkner's great novel and Manoury's work. Disregarding any programmatic representation of the novel, Manoury discussed the musical way in which the novel unfolds in time. Through the negation of chronological narrativity, both Faulkner and Manoury unfold events that become fully clarified only as the piece develops. In addition to his lecture, Manoury's *Jupiter*, a seminal piece in the development and application of computer-based score-following techniques, was brilliantly performed by Elizabeth McNutt. Manoury also held a master class seminar where he looked at the work of graduate composers at the University of Minnesota.

As for live performance, some of the festival highlights included a concert of chamber pieces with electronics performed by NeXT Ens, which included works by Burton Beerman, Douglas Geers, Gabriel Ottoson-Deal, Zack Browning and Margaret Schedel. This group is dedicated to performing works of live electronic and computer music, and its musical, intelligent and intense performance reveals a tremendous commitment to their mission. In particular, Shiau-uen Ding, the director and pianist, is a powerful force on the new music scene. Her solo recital, where she