

## THE QUESTIONS THAT REMAIN<sup>1</sup>

Frank Denyer

Today I know what I want to say, but on the other hand I am a little uncertain about how to approach it because some of the material is, shall we say, 'delicate'. So excuse me for using Bob Gilmore as a way in, a role I think he would have relished.

As a close colleague at Dartington College of Arts I saw Bob on an almost daily basis for about a decade. More importantly, well away from the College environment, we met every two or three weeks for long rambling conversations. There were usually just the two of us and it was during these convivial but intense meetings I saw another side of Bob. Many have invoked Bob as the careful and enthusiastic listener, or Bob the formidable academic, or the warm irrepressible sociable Bob, or the bubbly loquacious Bob. But there was another Bob, less often seen and less often spoken about. This was someone who was quite uncertain about his writing and the role of musical biography – what it was for or what it could do – someone who was searching for a legitimate way forward but unclear of the path to take. We talked much about the importance of musical anecdote in the oral transmission of musical cultures around the world, and how this was the foundation of the more formal written biographies in modern literate societies. We talked about new music in general and my own work in particular. Inevitably there were more questions than answers but our individual concerns were linked by a shared dissatisfaction with the status quo. In a recent paper given at Brunel University London,<sup>2</sup> John Croft said that it is important for artists to nourish their antipathies as assiduously as their enthusiasms. Bob and I certainly did both, but Bob would always subtly press me, sometimes by a mere silent pause, to go just a little further than I had intended. Consequently, a host of half-thought-through perceptions would always be taken back home for more detailed consideration.

I would like to invoke the spirit of these conversations today by highlighting a few questions that remain at the centre of my concerns as a composer. To provide a context let me start by making one rather commonplace observation. Music plays an essential and vital part in human life, in so far as we know of no human society, past or present, that is without music or indeed without many forms of music. Nonetheless we remain uncertain about the exact nature of music,

<sup>1</sup> *The Dreamer that Remains: A Portrait of Harry Partch*, directed by Stephen Poulit; Macmillan Films 1974. Poulit's title is taken from Laurens van der Post's book about the Kalahari bushmen, *The Lost World of the Kalahari* (Hogarth Press, London 1958); van der Post in turn is quoting a couplet from a poem by the South African poet Roy Campbell which he uses on the title page. The whole couplet runs: 'Pass World!: I am the dreamer that remains;/The man clear cut against the horizon'.

<sup>2</sup> John Croft, 'Philosophy by other means', Brunel Music Research Seminar, 28 October 2015.

or why certain abstract sounds carry such profound meaning and elicit such devotion.

Different societies at different times have speculated about this mystery, leaving us with a wide spectrum of ideas. There have been correspondingly diverse demands made of music. These encompass far wider horizons than those at large today where the most familiar validation of music is mediated through one individual's response to the perceived imperatives for self-expression in another. We might remind ourselves that the elevation of such prerogatives to their present supreme position is a relatively recent phenomenon. Looked at through a wider lens, music has been understood by different societies at different times to have affinities with matters cosmological (the harmony of the heavens and earth), or mathematical, or moral, or spiritual (a conduit for the voices of the gods), matters scientific, erotic, emotional, personal, social, educational, historical, medical and even the mundanely practical (such as persuading white termites to come out of their mud funnels, or cows to produce more milk). But as human life has evolved over such a relatively brief period, it is reasonable to assume that this does not yet represent the final sum of music's capacities. Perhaps we have so far hardly begun and its fullest realisation remains far in the future. If we are intent in trying to unlock a little more of music's potential, we must surely start by asking quite different questions to those currently in the spotlight. The problem is that we don't really know how to begin formulating such questions.

At this particular point in the twenty-first century, we find new music in a somewhat troubled state. It already seems a distant memory when a contemporary work was seen as fundamental to an understanding of the times and of ourselves, indicative of transformations in our collective sensibility and therefore an experience demanding close and immediate attention. These days it is hard to believe that a sentence such as 'Art today is a new kind of instrument, an instrument for modifying consciousness and organizing new modes of sensibility'<sup>3</sup> could ever have been written without irony. In the developed urban societies of the twentieth century it was a common belief, held even by people with no particular interest in the arts, that great art was a barometer of the immediate future, and an often repeated cliché described great artists as 'ahead of their times'. However, in the past two or three decades, these same societies have become increasingly embarrassed by such quaint and naïve concepts. It is also noticeable that the regular premieres of significant and transformative masterworks, which provided the essential underpinning for these older attitudes, have also declined and, not surprisingly therefore, audiences have continued to diminish in parallel, sometimes to near invisibility.

A generation has now grown up wondering how past audiences could have actually been shocked by new music. How can you be shocked by something as harmless as music? To them the thought seems unreal and perhaps a little childish. Lacking any credible belief in a future that would be fundamentally different from the inadequate present, except for changes brought about by the inevitable march of technology, it is surprising to note just how many of the intellectual attitudes from the twentieth century's new music are still embraced (although with slightly more hope than conviction). So new music

<sup>3</sup> Susan Sontag, 'One culture, One sensibility', in *Against Interpretation* (London: Penguin, 1961), p. 296.

concerts in the old sense still struggle on, but they have now become quite grim affairs even for their followers. Christopher Fox observed that certain composers in this tradition seem to have fallen out of love with music altogether.<sup>4</sup> Musicians like to blame their almost invisible audience on an intellectually numbed, aesthetically uncaring, uneducated populace, or at other times on just a lack of publicity, but the main cause is the music itself. Composers whose aim is to continue and extend the inheritance of this modernist past often feel that nobody is listening (which explains why Bob Gilmore, who did listen, seemed such a beacon of light).

New art music has become just another niche activity, a mere genre or sub-genre, kept from dying by individuals and institutions who maintain the touching belief that it may yet rise again like Lazarus. In a world of abundance it is robbed of significance, and new art music has declined into a harmless, if sophisticated, way of passing time.

This is what we have done to music. It all sounds rather glum, and yes, I realise the situation is far more nuanced than this implies, but if we use that excuse to sidestep the current impasse, we might never find a way forward.

### What Is To Be Done?

There is a lot that might be done if we can just prise ourselves away from the conceptual framework which presently surrounds new art music and which informs what is taught. This is an arena where discussion invariably invokes one or other of the dozen or so iconic figures (all European or North American white males) who define the agenda as if they alone were the poles around which the fundamental questions of our time can be understood. The general level of debate is dispiriting, because the concerns remain narrow and provincial, generally failing to really address an audience outside its own sealed sphere. New music that seeks to extend twentieth-century modernist attitudes has run out of steam, but it has left a rump that persists. Today's issues are not those of 50 years ago and cannot be accommodated by that type of mind set. This is a large subject and so, in order to be concrete and specific, I would like to take just two areas to demonstrate the depth of the reforms required.

#### 1. Migration

We live at the start of an age of migration and can expect future technological developments to make travel even faster, easier and cheaper than it is now, facilitating even greater population movements. People can no longer be kept in just one primary geographical location, and already we have seen significant cultural re-adjustments. The fundamental institutional pillars that formally kept the nation-state afloat suddenly appear more fragile, while intercontinental entities, political and commercial, have become powerful. For the individual, migration is radically changing definitions of personal identity. In this digitally connected age the new global awareness now permeates all our lives. Our global interdependence has never been more obvious.

In fact, the new phenomenon of continual fluid migration may eventually come to be seen as the key experience by which the

<sup>4</sup> Christopher Fox, 'Falling in Love Again', *TEMPO* 69:273 (2014), pp.30–32.

twenty-first century is defined. Do we have an art music fit for such an age? Certainly not! Western art music finds itself trapped by its own intellectual exclusivity appealing to a very narrow demographic with a very particular set of cultural assumptions. But how have non-western art musics, whether court or temple or religious, fared in this regard? Some resist change, but many others have adapted vigorously to the sensitivities of the modern world and have made significant contributions to the wider cultural environment. With the decline of colonialism in the twentieth century, and/or the rebirth after the cataclysm of the Second World War, many art musics were revitalised to play a part in the rebirth of the nation. Some of these came to be heard as the authentic voice of a new future, although today in this global age, it is a stance that has become difficult to sustain. Consequently, in the last few decades these non-western art musics have found themselves reduced to keeping alive nostalgic memories of a fading past, or reviving flagging regional sentiments, or they sink yet lower as minor players in the tourist industry.

These observations are of necessity very generalised, but nonetheless one thing seems clear, *no musical tradition today, however impressive its history, can by itself provide a passport to a newly created future that transcends its own narrow cultural origins.*

It follows that all musical education and training that predominantly uses methods that are inward looking and traditionally circumscribed hinders as much as helps. The concerns, like those of western classical music, inevitably appear parochial in a global context. The big story, the epic narrative of homo sapiens' whole adventure with musical sound, which as musicians we should have ingrained in our DNA, still remains beyond our mental horizons, whatever our background.

This is a measure of how our academic institutions have failed us. There is an urgent need for a completely new kind of historical framework, one that is fundamentally global. We require the tools to question our self-referential cultural boundaries because these have become a heavy break on the contemporary imagination. Creative instincts have to be re-linked to the daily cultural experience and to do this we need to re-discover the interdependence of all regional traditions.

Let me give a concrete historical example. We might have expected by this time that it would be easy to compare the changes that initiated the European baroque (the first operas, introduction of the bar line, new forms and instruments, etc.) to the equally significant transformations simultaneously occurring in Japanese music (new forms like kabuki, bunraku, jiuta and sokyoku, similarly involving new instruments and new vocal styles). In both cases increased political stability initiated a period of profound cultural change as reflected in architecture, town planning, painting and poetry, as well as music. Parallel musical developments were also occurring at precisely this time in the Moghul courts of north India. The way our histories have always been written, there appear to be no links between any of these examples, while traditional musical historians, if they notice them at all, can so easily dismiss them as unimportant coincidences. However, the more we slice history cross-culturally the more such coincidences come to light.

A non-historical example: if we had multiple cultural perspectives on tuning issues we wouldn't be locked into the single paradigm of harmonic ratios and the overtone series. This cannot remain as the sole method for thinking about tuning when it so singularly fails to

explain pitch relationships in most of the world's actual music. For example, the definition of 'pitch' and its relationship to concept of 'note', and 'note' itself as a flexible pitch entity, these require more sophisticated concepts that deal with pitch fluidity as well as incorporating the perceptual shifts that affect our judgement when pitches are heard linearly (melodically) rather than harmonically.

It is depressing that such calls for a wider frame of reference still have to be made in the twenty-first century. Other disciplines such as science, literature, physics, archaeology, mathematics etc. have all made modifications to their disciplines as a matter of course. They would be astonished at the unreformed, largely uncritical narratives of music history that are still taught.

That traditional histories cannot answer the questions which are arising today was first seen as a primary problem very nearly a century ago by Harry Partch. In response he started to construct his own history and build his own individual cultural tradition based on an alternative and quite different set of assumptions. He wrote:

Sometime between 1923 and 1928 I finally became so dissatisfied with the body of knowledge and usages as ordinarily imparted in the teaching of music that I refused to accept, or develop my own work on the basis of any part of it . . . it was the beginning of a new philosophy of music intuitively arrived at. Just how old this 'new' philosophy actually is has since been a continual revelation to me.<sup>5</sup>

Today this bold step appears as nothing less than heroic, but it has been noticeably uninfluential in musical academies where the basic perspective, although updated, has hardly changed. The twentieth century saw Partch as just an eccentric outsider whose music failed to relate to the principal concerns of the time; but from our viewpoint in the twenty-first century it was he who first identified many of today's key issues and is therefore a pivotal figure of his age. By drawing from wider cultural roots than his contemporaries, he opened up a new agenda for musical composition, involving new ways of thinking about tuning, instruments, corporeality, melody, form, monody, music's visual presentation and much else. This would have no significance at all if the quality of his music was poor, but now the many virtues of his work are at last becoming aurally apparent to a wider public. The music itself will ultimately prove his best advocate.

## **2. The Problem of Increasing Conformity and the new Academicism**

In this era of commercial globalism there are unprecedented forces that steer the individual to ever greater social conformity. Within my own lifetime we have seen the world's urbanites gradually adopting the same clothes, watching the same films, driving the same cars, eating the same food, buying the same brands of electronics and naturally saying alarmingly similar things to one another. If they didn't then global consumerism and its mass market would wither. Our first duty as consumers is to be as similar to one another as possible and the more we do so the more we are rewarded. Modern marketing gives us the freedom to express ourselves through our individual consumer choices, but the differences between the options steadily declines while an illusion of ever greater choice is cleverly maintained

<sup>5</sup> Harry Partch, *Genesis of a Music*, 2nd edition (New York: Da Capo Press, 1974), p. 4.

and even strengthened. As Oceania's Ministry of Truth might have said 'uniformity means greater variety'!

When in 1974 I first went to live for a time in the USA I was amazed by the size of the supermarkets. One long aisle devoted exclusively to bread seemed to stretch to the horizon and contain every kind of loaf imaginable representing every corner of the world. How wonderful I thought, I can work my way through all the different types quite systematically. Disillusionment was not long coming, as I discovered the differences were primarily cosmetic and none of the loaves had any really distinctive taste at all. Many areas of life, even those that at first seem remote from consumerist pressures, have come to show similar traits, and new art music is no exception. Tom Service in a recent BBC Radio 3 essay described the present scene as one of unprecedented variety, and a 'continual churn of restless seismic energy'.<sup>6</sup> But isn't this, too, a false variety masking an underlying uniformity? And is energy a virtue in itself especially if it merely churns but never reaches a goal? From Korea to New York, from Japan to Paris, from Hong Kong to London, Sydney to Stockholm, composers are making variants of the same few basic composition templates they have derived from near identical sets of intellectual concerns. When one considers that, unlike other artistic disciplines, composers require no expensive equipment or institutional framework, their work being mainly done in private by solitary individuals, so one might think the sky would be the limit and their most cherished attribute would be the freedom to compose 'whatever they damn well liked'. So why instead do they choose to make yet more variants of the same few templates and then do it over and over again?

Because these templates now seemingly persuade us to clone so called 'new art music' ad infinitum, we might wonder if we have entered a world *without any 'new' music in any meaningful sense of the term?* I think this is now too obvious to deny.

But why has it happened? Have we lost the need for new music? Perhaps we live in a culture that can recycle so imaginatively it can now dispense with the new. Or have we just forgotten what the new really is, and become acclimatised instead to this old friend we always called 'new'? The genuinely new was never like this. What prevents us? Maybe we have given up the struggle altogether and have come to think that the new just isn't a possibility any more. Perhaps its disappearance is inevitable at a time when the primary orientation is so relentlessly visual.

As the need for new music declines, a parallel but not unrelated struggle is in progress between the public and private realms. It is indeed still raging. Almost daily we hear clarion calls for more transparency, open access, fewer secrets, usually followed by demands for more surveillance. What happens in private has come to be feared. Private lives by their very nature allow for greater non-conformity and demand higher levels of individual responsibility. This applies both in family life and for all personal pursuits that are essentially cultivated in solitude, including painting, poetry and musical composition. These private worlds are under attack. A popular British TV documentary series is entitled 'What do Artists do all day?' implying dark secrets to be revealed. There have been calls to ban one-to-one teaching in music, the bedrock of musical transmission across

<sup>6</sup> Tom Service, 'Where have all the Seismic moments gone?' BBC Radio 3 Essay, broadcast 8 January 2016.

generations, because of the fear of what might be going on when nobody is watching. On the other hand, those fortunate artistic activities that can be seen as open, transparent and social (often called democratic) with group-defined artistic goals that can be realised in workshops (even group composition has been mooted as suitable), these are all particularly favoured but by their nature encourage social conformity.

Under this onslaught, having lost their audience to the mass media, with no means of earning a living and with no obvious way out, many serious composers find refuge in the arms of academe where teaching, and thinking about teaching, come to occupy most of their time. Indeed, in a strange reversal, these pedagogic demands sometimes become the whole *raison d'être* for their engaging with composition at all. This marriage of convenience between composers and universities is not cost free. Day by day institutionalised culture inculcates its own gentle virtues of conformity. Of course dons encourage freedom of thought, and they really believe in the value of originality, but when the whole institution of which they are a part primarily exists as a well-oiled machine for passing judgements which determine who gets a nice gong and who a lesser one, it is pointless to insist that student composers, any more than composer dons, freely act as if these constraints didn't exist. Everyone learns which values are encouraged and which are not, which enhance their CVs and those that don't, who get grants and prizes and who doesn't. There has clearly been a subtle infiltration into new music of such attitudes, leading to what I would call the 'New Academicism'. Therefore, I would say to all young composers who find themselves in institutions, for god's sake stop producing more of the same, disobey your advisors, ask other questions, take the long view, learn to be lonely, and above all say 'no' before it's too late.

The maelstrom of conformist consumerism in the wider world where individuality, vision, ideas, integrity, beliefs and skills are just words to be commandeered as sales techniques, when 'art' has been reduced to 'culture' (about which we hear a great deal), when composers are taught the importance of cultivating brand loyalty in their listeners, but when new templates with really new questions are no longer an aspiration, we have to ask – is escape any longer possible? Is it any more desirable? Or have we finally entered the territory of Francis Fukuyama's 'end of history'?

In response we cannot comfortably fall back on our faith in the human imagination to ultimately find a way forward, because these problems are themselves a failure of our imaginations. Imagination may be our greatest asset, but like our dreams, it is never really under our control. There may be actions which might nourish it, but ultimately we are its servants and 'it bloweth where it listeth'.<sup>7</sup>

Is all then lost? Perhaps not yet. It is obvious that at this point really significant new compositions have become as rare as snow leopards. Some are smothered at birth by the sheer quantity of artistic detritus today's urban cultures deposit, but we must not yet rule out the possibility that wholly new musical constructs unlike anything we can yet imagine might suddenly appear. To make a space for this possibility we must first clear away the garbage.

<sup>7</sup> 'The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth' (John 3:8).

There is much to be done. We must make a start by burying the dead – then heal the living.

As composers it is time to act. After all, we have not yet arrived at the beginning.

These, for me, are some of the questions that remain.