

regarding material, new technology and curatorial practice, and some stylistic seepage from extra-musical sources. The inspiration comes from an international outlook, rather than from the old national stereotypes and archetypes; multiplicity trumps domesticity, resulting in festivals such as this one: imaginative and bold.

Leo Chadburn

Melos-Ethos International Festival of Contemporary Music 2015

In the closing sentence of an essay titled 'Music and New Music', from 1960, Theodor Adorno claimed, with his characteristic lack of equivocation, that the difference between new music and music in general was akin to the difference between good music and bad music. His rather sweeping claim was mitigated somewhat by his definition of 'new music', which was highly restricted in terms of its technical and moral imperatives. With respect to technique and style, 'new music' for Adorno meant almost exclusively the freely atonal music of Schoenberg and his students. Morally speaking, 'new music' was defined as that which embodied a critical resistance to the existing order and preserved the freedom of subjective expression as demanded by a Hegelian view of history.

Such a definition of new music may be easy to criticise today. After all, one can now see that Adorno used complex philosophical ideas about moral superiority and 'world-history' to promote traditions of which he was a part, for he was both a student of Alban Berg and a late member of the German *Bildungsbürgertum*. In other words, his appeal to ethics was a cover for his personal preferences. Furthermore, his arguments about the superiority of one tradition over others are now generally seen as untenable: we who live in this age of relativism are taught, for better and worse, that all traditions should be valued because all traditions have valuable, if different, things to offer.

But for those of us who would like to rescue standards of judgment from the oblivion of relativism in which we now swim, the concept of 'new music' might be worth revisiting. And this year's Melos-Ethos festival, which took place in Bratislava from 7 to 13 November 2015, provided a perfect occasion for reassessing the usefulness of the concept. For those who don't know the festival, a little history is in order.

The first Melos-Ethos International Festival of Contemporary Music was held in Bratislava in

1991. The fact that it began shortly after the fall of the communist regime in 1989 is no coincidence: the festival was founded specifically to present modernist works that had been marginalised during the period of 'normalisation' that followed the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. The festival's name is a testament to this history – a reference to both the formal (melos) and ethical (ethos) dimensions of music. The festival has, therefore, an essential connection to the purported moral duty of 'new music': not because it corresponds to some Hegelian idea of history, but because its own history was shaped by the critique of a totalitarian regime and by the desire for freedom of expression.

The festival has been held biennially since its founding in 1991. Past festivals have featured guest composers, including György Ligeti, Vinko Globokar, Erkki-Sven Tüür, Krzysztof Penderecki, Zygmunt Krauze, Arvo Pärt, Sofia Gubaidulina, Steve Reich and Kaija Saariaho. This year's festival did not have a featured guest, but was instead organised around an idea: that all pieces on the programme be composed in the last five years. This, then, was a 'contemporary music festival' that was truly dedicated to *contemporary* music. To the extent that that which is contemporary is also 'new', Melos-Ethos 2015 had another connection to the concept of 'new music', one beyond the ethical dimension noted above.

But not all that is contemporary is new, of course. To designate something as 'new' suggests that it is original and unheard. The 'contemporary', on the other hand, is *everything* that lives with us today, be it 'old' or 'new', familiar or unfamiliar. Adorno made a similar distinction between 'new' and 'contemporary' in his essay 'Music and New Music', but whereas he used 'new' as a badge of honour for music that embodied a cry of protest against an overwhelmingly oppressive social reality, I prefer to use 'new' to describe music that is (merely) original. If 'original' also implies a value judgment, if it suggests that something is 'better' because it is original, I am quite willing to live with that.

The question before us, then, is: to what extent did this contemporary music festival contain music that was also 'new'? Of the 52 compositions presented in 11 concerts, there were 15 world premieres and 24 Slovak premieres. Additionally, there were fringe events, including composition and performance workshops and a film screening. It was a rich programme – not only because of the amount of activity during this weeklong festival, but also because it

featured some outstanding performers and some genuinely 'new' music.

On balance, the 'new' seemed to outweigh the merely 'contemporary'. Or, for this reviewer at least, there was enough 'new' for it to dictate the course of my overall impression. Given the challenges of devoting a large festival to music composed in the last five years, this suggests that Melos-Ethos 2015 was a great success. Granted, there were also pieces that were decidedly not 'new', and even rather forgettable (I remember them only because I wrote detailed notes in my programme), but even these works were well composed and received highly dedicated performances.

Performers included established players such as German accordionist Teodoro Anzellotti and the Belgian ensemble Het Collectief, both of whom gave excellent concerts. The latter's included pieces by Bram Van Camp, Helena Tulve and Viera Janárčeková, all of which were fresh and engaging. Other guests from abroad were the members of Ensemble TIMF from South Korea, performing a programme that included a work by Bratislava-based composer Marián Lejava. Lejava's *Principium for viola and six instruments* clearly borrowed from Grisey's *Partiels* in its opening gesture and its use of that gesture as the basis for the unfolding form, but it still managed to sound 'new'.

Local ensembles were also on the programme, and they showed the depth of talent in the region. Sinfonietta Bratislava's performance of Toshio Hosokawa's *Hika, Elegy for Violin and String Orchestra* deserves special mention. Another recent piece by Hosokawa, *The Raven, monodrama for mezzo-soprano and 12 players*, was staged at the Slovak National Theatre by Slovakia's Quasars Ensemble, led by Ivan Buffa and with Eva Šušková as the soloist. The effect of this piece, which has a relatively limited sound palette, was helped significantly by

the choreographer and dancer Reona Sato (of the Slovak National Ballet) who best captured the fantastic and bizarre elements of Edgar Allan Poe's narrative. Finally, the festival's own Melos Ethos Ensemble gave an ambitious concert of works including Peter Eötvös's *da capo for solo cimbalom and ensemble* and Johannes Maria Staud's *Le Voyage, monodrama for actor, six-part vocal ensemble, four instruments and electronics* in the presence of the composers, who hail from neighbouring Hungary and Austria, respectively.

But I was looking for more neighbours: given the quality of the festival, I felt it could be better attended by those outside of Bratislava. Since moving to Bratislava after having lived in North America, Germany and Ireland, I have become aware of how some in Western Europe disregard everything from countries of the former Eastern Bloc. As many here can tell you, when the borders opened after the fall of communism, Slovaks eagerly visited Vienna and other Western cities; but there was no rush in the other direction. In fact, when I met two young Austrians on a day-trip to Bratislava, they told me that they liked the city but were surprised that so few people spoke German. They seemed unaware of the arrogance of their statement – I'm sure they would never wonder why so few Austrians speak Slovak.

In any case, Bratislava has much to offer, no matter which language you speak, and for readers of this journal, the Melos-Ethos festival should be high on a list of reasons to visit Slovakia's capital. While Wien Modern – which also took place in November 2015, only 35 miles from Bratislava – glorified the relativism of the contemporary with a festival titled 'Pop. Song.Voice' (complete with 'rave events'), Melos-Ethos undertook the more difficult task of cultivating something new.

Marcus Zagorski