

ART BEGINS WHERE CRAFTSMANSHIP ENDS

Kevin Volans

In the last few months of his life, Bob Gilmore embarked on another major project: that of writing a book about my work. He pressed me to try to define what I meant by non-conceptual composition and composition as an art form. This is a condensation of some of the topics we talked about for many hours.

Some 40 years ago, Bunita Marcus gave a talk at Darmstadt which caused something of a scandal. It ran roughly as follows (I am paraphrasing heavily):

- 1) I believe in music as an art form;
- 2) I don't believe in music as an entertainment form;
- 3) An entertainment form fulfils your expectations;
- 4) An art form goes beyond expectations;
- 5) This should include the expectations of the composer;
- 6) Therefore, you cannot pre-plan a composition, because the composer cannot, or should not, know the outcome of the work in advance.

There were vociferous objections from the audience. (This is an echo from 30 years ago – a time when music as an art was important). However, despite a possible flaw in the logic, her point was apposite: too many composers were assuming compositional methods, concepts and planning would guarantee good results – a good piece. The bitter truth is that the same method, the identical method even, in the hands of two different composers can result in a masterpiece or a piece of rubbish.¹

Why?

Maybe it's because there is no method (that I know of) that takes psychological logic into account. Or because good technique is the right method *at the right time*, and more importantly, a method or a pre-plan for a composition is *only the stating of a problem, not the solution*.

¹ Compare the following two melodies:

♩ = 100



In addition, pre-planning, no matter how sophisticated, has something of Hollywood about it – directing and predicting the audience’s experience – entertainment on an elevated level. Nobody was more aware of all of this than Stockhausen, who was a much more subtle composer and politician than most people realised, and whose methods have often been badly misunderstood.

In the three and a half years I studied with Stockhausen in the 70s, I (and several other composers, of course) became convinced there were many myths surrounding serial and/or conceptual methods of composition.

Some of these myths are:

- 1) Completeness is better than incompleteness. This can be as basic and simplistic as thinking a 12-note row or chord is inherently superior to an 11-note row – or the idea that if you don’t use all available possibilities you are somehow not ‘professional’ (In Stockhausen’s polemics this made you a ‘mere mannerist’).
- 2) Balance is preferable to imbalance.
- 3) All things can be measured and controlled (a very insidious pre-conception, this).
- 4) The universal is superior to the specific, or the local.
- 5) Using things that occur in ‘nature’, like the overtone row, or the Golden Mean and the Fibonacci series for example, will give better results.
- 6) *Handwerk* (craftsmanship) is a sign of good technique. (This usually simply means that the numbers all add up correctly.)
- 7) Composition is part of an historically, sequentially evolving philosophy (what I would call straight-line thinking.)
- 8) Extra-musical ideas, like some derived, say, from philosophy or natural science, will somehow improve the quality of the work, at least intellectually.
- 9) The abdication of the composer and entrusting the work to a system or to chance will somehow ‘free’ the music.
- 10) Music can be structured, like architecture, without reference to time.
- 11) Innovation is the same as originality.

There are more, of course . . .

The point I wish to make is that these concepts are useful only as ladders: tools for the composer to reach, let’s say, a certain elevation, from which they can view their work. Craftsmanship enables one to repeat the successes of previous work. If composition is an attempt to *re-define reality*, the art of composition, or composition as an art form, must begin only after you throw the ladder, your craftsmanship, away.

So what then are the tools of composition after the ladders have gone? Are there tools of non-conceptual composition? And how does one distinguish non-conceptual composition from bumbling along in an amateurish fashion?

For Bob, I tried listing what I thought was essential to serious composition (although at another time, the list may be a little different):

- 1) Education (‘Know everything’ – Morton Feldman);
- 2) Passion (knowledge without love bears no fruit);
- 3) Vigilance (continually watching yourself over your own shoulder – playing your own devil’s advocate);
- 4) Strategies and tools (as opposed to techniques of composition);
- 5) Speculation.

I have time today to talk about only the last of these: Speculation. By speculation I mean prolonged and serious meditation on marginal ideas, preferably in lengthy discussion with another professional composer (rather than running after commissions, filling in Arts Council applications, or sweating over deadlines).

This is a random selection from my diary of things my friends and I have speculated on over the years – some are more specific, some more general:

What constitutes the new, as opposed to the merely novel? How much invention is necessary?

How is composition evolving? Enrique Vila-Matas: ‘Was [Is] the most innovative art of my day going toward nothing? Or was it going toward something I still hadn’t found and that it would perhaps do me a lot of good to discover?’²

If composition is not reverse analysis (or research), then what is it?

Can one find a way of making each element bleed into another – counterpoint bleeding into notation, colour into rhythm?

How does one get an idea of sustaining the piece rather than extending the piece?

Think of how notation will make a fixed idea become unfixed.

How does one bring in a little seduction?

Where is notation going (at this point in history)?

How can one find a vertical counterpoint of colour?

Can one find a connection between notation and the distribution of colour – and then lose it?!

The more subjective the piece, the more stationary it becomes.

Does a piece become more subjective, proportional to the less we understand what the piece is?

Do we ever understand what we have written?

A quote from Schopenhauer: ‘The subject is that which knows everything, but is known by none’.

Maybe the less we understand what the piece is, the more perfect it is.

A quote from the painter Francesco Clemente: ‘The stronger the image, the lighter the medium’.

What is an image in music? How does one know when one has created an image?

What is surface in music?

Detail: detail articulates surface and thereby articulates form. Without detail or surface is there form?

A single detail that transforms the whole, like a dot of red in a Poussin painting.

Can one think in terms of scale as opposed to form?

How does one write a piece without form?

When is a formless piece finished?

How does one write a piece without content – that attempts to eliminate content?

Who composes the music?

And finally, sadly, is music no longer an art form? has it become merely a media artefact?

² Enrique Vila-Matas, ‘... only art at the margins ... can be truly innovative’, in *The Illogic of Kassel* (New York: New Directions, 2015).