

The Question of Canon in Electro-Acoustic Music: A Case Study in Instituting Masterpieces

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At the cusp of the 21st-Century in the summer of 2000, the Lincoln Center Festival - a high-profile annual concert series that takes place in New York City and elicits reviews in the New York Times - sponsored a concert event under the rubric "Masterpieces of 20th-Century Multi-Channel Tape Music." Although it may be argued that the term "masterpieces" was used by the organizers as a marketing ploy, it nonetheless conjures implications of canonization and criteria for hegemonic claims à la Heinrich Schenker's *Das Meisterwerk in der Musik*. Indeed, by using the word "masterpieces," the organizers not only posit a canon of works for the specific musical genre of multi-channel tape music (or, more generally, electronic music), but also place that narrowly defined canon within a larger canon of Western art music. At first glance, this position may seem unremarkable; upon further reflection, however, the use of the word "masterpieces" in reference to works of electronic music reveals itself to be provocative in the face of both the tradition of Western art music and the electro-acoustic music community.

The use of the word "masterpieces" in the concert heading begs the question: what were the criteria by which such "masterpieces" were chosen? The printed program offers little answers; indeed, the supposed overview entitled "Notes on the Program" does not mention any of the works or composers featured in the concert, and only three of the six works are listed in the historic time line included in the program. The inclusion of those three works on the time line does suggest, however, that at least the notion of historical significance played some part in the selection of "masterpieces." The online program notes offers perhaps a further clue with the following statement: "Each work presented is indicative of one of the main schools of electronic composition of the last half of the 20th century." This explanation only raises more questions - and ultimately betrays the aesthetic and cultural bias of the organizers - as it is further unclear how the curators of this concert define "the main schools of electronic composition," especially since not every work or composer featured in the concert is clearly associated with a particular school of composition, and at least two major schools of electronic composition seem conspicuous in their absence.

Using the Lincoln Center Festival "Masterpieces of 20th Century Multi-Channel Tape Music" concert program as a point of departure, I explore in this paper how some members of the electro-acoustic music community have sought the acceptance of their works into the mainstream canon of Western art music, why such acceptance has often been eluded, and how other members of the electro-acoustic music community have conversely - and perhaps consequently - sought to reject the hegemony of Western art music altogether.