

New Music and Social Resonance

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In his 1993 book Voice of Tyranny, Temples of Silence, Murray Schafer claims:

“The great revolutions in art history are changes of context rather than style. The first big contextual change in Western art music occurred when music left the outdoors and entered the cathedral; the second occurred with the appearance of the concert hall and opera house; the broadcasting and recording studio is responsible for the third.” (p. 117-118)

The word “context” means to join together, to interweave. Contextualization implies some sort of “text” embedded within a field of some sort. However, it is the texts themselves and their inter-relatedness that creates the field - thus the idea of “interweaving”.

The history of performed music is a collection of pieces chosen by individuals and combined into programmes and seasons of programmes. The choice of each successive work has been influenced by the choices made before it and the cumulative choices made have created the field of music as we know it.

The revolutions Schafer mention describe “diffusion” in both a physical (acoustic) and metaphorical (social/cultural) manner - they are about the “resonance” of musical texts, individually and collectively, within their environment. Each of Schafer’s revolutions produced larger audiences in more concentrated environments. Decisions on what music was presented - curatorial decisions - were made by increasingly fewer people to increasingly larger audiences: outdoor concerts to whomever was within earshot (in the days long before amplification); the cathedral to hundreds; the concert hall to small thousands and broadcasting to hundreds of thousands. The needs and tastes of these relatively fewer and fewer producers helped produce what we now know as the canon.

We are in the middle of a fourth great revolution, as the era of broadcasting gives way to the narrowcasting of the internet. The potential audiences of internet broadcasting number in the millions but the nature of the diffusion is that it is both very broad but also very local.

It is very easy to get caught up in the “local” aspects of the new diffusions, but what is needed is more macrocosmic thinking - a new curatorial vision - with the era of the presentation of masterworks chosen by musical “experts” giving way to the need to provide environments for good individual choices.

To do so means first to listen well - to listen not just to individual works but to their resonance.

The recontextualization of music by these new technologies is creating a new social “acoustic” and demands of us the need to listen carefully to the resonance of what we do - to the metaphoric “sounding” of our work within the world. By listening well to our physical and social cultural worlds we are able to make sounds which diffuse well within the and tell us through their resonance about the world we live in.