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Controversies Incorporated

The following four articles are responses to material previously published in *Contact*. The first two are prompted by Nicola LeFanu's 'Master Musician: An Impregnable Taboo?' (*Contact* 31 (Autumn 1987), pp.4-8). The others extend the 'composer/performer' debate, including the issue of the notation of time, to which contributions in *Contact* 31 came from Andrew Ball ('Bridging that Gap' pp.27-8), Ivan Moody ('The Mystic's Point of View' pp.28-9) and James Ingram ('The Notation of Time: A reaction to Richard Barrett's Reply' pp.29-30). Further responses are invited to these and other matters raised in *Contact*, and should be sent to Christopher Fox, 3 Old Moor Lane, Dringhouses, York YO2 2QE.

Diana Burrell

Accepting Androgyny

Nicola LeFanu's article 'Master Musician: an Impregnable Taboo?' is excellent; no stone has been left unturned. The disgraceful statistics she quotes indicate that steps do need to be taken to ensure a more even representation of women and men working as composers. It seems to me that there are two approaches to this, and I understand that the 'Women in Music' organisation (set up last Spring to tackle exactly this kind of issue) is trying both.

One way is to draw the attention of concert promoters, festival directors, the BBC – quietly yet most persistently – to the works of our women composers and ensure that they are placed in programmes. Then let the music speak for itself. The other way is to promote the music more actively, to blow fanfares loudly and announce concerts of pieces by Women Composers. Whilst both approaches may have an effect, by emphasising the second one we run the risk of becoming a 'category': 'Women Composers', like 'Russian-Nationalist Composers', or 'Minimal Composers'.

We should not be seen as a group; probably the only thing we have in common with each other is our gender. The music we write is stylistically very diverse. Judith Weir's music (though I admire it enormously) bears little resemblance to my own. Maconchy's is something else again. Therefore, to build a concert around works all composed by women, with the implication that this factor is enough to connect them, would be akin to promoting a concert of works by, say William Walton, Brian Ferneyhough and Howard Skempton. Personally, I cannot find many musical strands linking these three!

There is also the point that Edward MacDowell once made:¹

I write to protest earnestly and strongly against the lumping together of American Composers. Unless we are worthy of being put on programmes with other composers, to stand or

fall, leave us alone. By giving such a concert you tacitly admit that we are too inferior to stand comparison with composers of Europe . . .

I do want my music chosen to be played in concerts; I do not want it chosen because it was written by a woman.

At the moment, thematic programme-planning seems much in vogue, and a festival director could well seize on the idea of having 'Women Composers' as a theme. However, what appears to be a strongly positive gesture could misfire completely in a following year should a suggestion for performing a particular work by a composer who happens to be female be put forward. 'A woman? No, we did women composers last year; let's do something else. Scandinavians perhaps? Americans?' Rather in the same way that the well-intentioned (though totally unfeminist) idea of wages for housework, a few years back, meant in reality that if a wife were paid for keeping house the man need not so much as lift a finger, our festival director, by promoting one or two concerts with work by female composers in them, might consider that he had 'done his bit' and need never therefore play anything by a woman in the future.

We must take steps to secure performances of our music but, at the same time, we must take only the kind of steps that will not result in our making yet more chains to hold us back. We also need to examine our own attitudes. However many opportunities are made for women, however much positive discrimination is applied, all will be in vain unless we re-assess, with honesty, the way we view our careers. Nicola LeFanu asks why men composers are more successful than women, and what happens to the 'large number of undoubtedly talented young female composers that come to attention during their school and university days?' This is the question that is asked across all the professions. Why is it invariably women who later on become the under-achievers?

For most women (though many of them would deny it) their career does take second place to caring for partner and family and organising a household. When the first child arrives, the female parent will assume, without question usually, that it is her job – even her right – to be the one who may take time off to look after it or, even if she continues working, the one who is able to sit back 'career-wise' – making family responsibilities an excuse for not seeking professional challenges – for a few years. The man's work, out of necessity, then becomes the more important. He becomes the breadwinner, and the woman often re-directs her own energies towards helping his career. I suspect a significant number of talented females have sacrificed their musical gifts to those of their mate.

Whilst it is undoubtedly important to make it possible for women to re-enter their professions later on, it is even more important to create the kind of society in which traditional roles and expectations are fluid, open to change. We who work in the Arts, where work is often on a freelance basis and its pattern therefore irregular, are in a prime position to effect such changes. (Regarding composing competitions, Nicola LeFanu mentions the fact that they are almost

always for composers in their twenties and early thirties, thus excluding women who take time off to have families. Let us press for change here anyway. Many of the best composers, male or female, do not begin to develop properly until later. Why not have competitions without an age-limit? If the prize were to be awarded only to an unpublished manuscript, there would be no risk of its being received by someone established who therefore did not need the exposure.)

We live in a society that is certainly unequal in many ways. One of them is that, although it may now be socially acceptable for a woman to have children and career, it is still not so for a man to care for the children and have no career. He is not yet free to choose either to be the parent at home looking after a family, or to be the partner who perhaps takes on a part-time or undemanding low-paid job in order to help bolster the family's finances. The idea of his refusing to conform to the stereotype of ambitious breadwinner is still, on the whole, considered unfavourably, and it is women in particular who find greatest difficulty in coming to terms with the idea. If the woman is released from her traditional duties, and particularly if the onus is on her to support her family, she must take a real responsibility for her work. In the case of a composer, it becomes vital that commissions are sought, contacts followed up, or teaching-posts clinched. In other words, a woman has, through necessity, to develop a much more positive image of herself as a working person.

All of this requires a considerable degree of courage, but it is essential to challenge stereotypes and traditional patterns of living, and doing so can only be of help to men too. As LeFanu points out, patriarchy is equally bad for them; indeed I know male composers who, because they do not conform to the traditional male image – perhaps they seem rather reserved, don't push themselves forward, appear quiet in their ambitions – are frequently passed over in the way that women are. So let us look first at our own attitudes to our lives and our work, and then make it a priority to create a truly flexible society, so that, for example, the 'remarkable man . . . sufficiently free of conventional ambition' that he is willing to manage his wife's career, and the home and children, in order that she can concentrate fully on her work as a composer, may be encouraged to flourish! Then such an idea will no longer seem strange to us and such a way of living (among others) will become a real option. Women's work, in music as elsewhere, will naturally take its place alongside that of men: the idea of the 'Woman Composer' will become a redundant one.

In all our efforts to redress the balance of the sexes in the field of composition, let us keep in mind that the term 'Woman Composer' is a temporary label – useful to us at the moment perhaps, but to be dropped as soon as possible. In reality, there are only composers, only creative musical minds which order the sounds so that others can play them and listen to them. Some of these minds are housed in female bodies, some in male. Do we really want a situation where, in a concert programme of four pieces, 'two are by women and two by men; in an opera season, three operas by women, three by men'? We surely have to go further than this and create the sort of climate in which it does not matter if, by chance, a whole season's works should be by male composers because, by chance, the ones in a previous season may all have been by women. In other words, I believe that the importance attached to gender must be swept away.

We are all a mixture of masculine and feminine, and if I compose 'out of the wholeness of myself,' then I celebrate not my 'female-ness', but the female and the male polarities within me.

¹ In a letter to Felix Mottl, 13 February 1904, after MacDowell had seen an American Composers' concert advertised in the morning papers.

Rhian Samuel

Women Composers Today: A Personal View

Female composers have been aware for a long time of the sparsity of women's music in concert programmes in this country; Nicola LeFanu's facts and figures generally confirm our worst suspicions. Many have met with some sort of discrimination in education or career, but for those over 40, as LeFanu also confirms, awareness of it generally came slowly. For instance, I recall quite vividly the announcement of one of my teachers, about to hire professional soloists for a university concert: 'Whenever I am offered two instrumental soloists of equal ability, man and woman, I *always* choose the man!' At the age of 21 and 'unenlightened', I was not perturbed. Two years later, as a graduate student in the United States, I was asked by an alert female researcher if I had ever encountered prejudice against women; I said I had not. But the question set me to wondering about the extent of my teacher's bias . . . did it affect his judgement of the soloists' quality in the first place? Besides, he was a powerful man; did it affect other judgements too?

The level of awareness of discrimination against women composers is greater in the 1980s; even so, the situation is still governed by Catch 22. Complaining can be viewed as self-promotion; this is anathema to many women, and so they tend to remain silent. Also, as the establishment is always quick to point out, getting performances is difficult for men too. We could say, as LeFanu does, that those (mostly) men who run the system – concert promoters, BBC producers, publishers, conductors, critics, even performers – must offer women their just voice. But musicians, like sportsmen, shy away from moral reform; such change will not come about of its own volition. A positive move, one might think, has been the formation of 'Women in Music' now celebrating its first anniversary;¹ could it become a strong lobbying-organisation? The group is very diverse; it represents far more interests than simply those of women composers and may already be too diffuse for such single-minded activity.

I believe the route will prove more circuitous. One very real barrier to the success of women composers is female prejudice itself. Women commonly feel inadequate to assume dominant roles over their peers; it is but a small step to project such feelings onto other women. This inadequacy is clearly reflected in our educational system, where the representation of female students in composition-classes (and conducting-classes) is far lower than that of men. But a wind of change is blowing. Women, traditionally outnumbering men in undergraduate music-courses are at some universities (King's London and Reading,

for instance) *required* to enrol in introductory composition-courses. At my own university, Reading, this is leading to a much more equitable representation of women in the elective composition-course during the final year. Women who previously lacked the self-esteem even to try to compose – and show their work to others – have amazed themselves with their ability. The same growth is bound to occur earlier, now that the GCSE syllabus has such a large composition component. Women, tasting what it is like to compose, are becoming interested in – and sympathetic to – what other women accomplish. And when there are as many women composing music as there are men, perhaps the pressure to include women's music will be too great to resist, even in the last bastions of misogyny. *Women in Music* can play an invaluable role here, offering support and raising interest among women themselves.

I do not know the extent to which the presence of women composition-teachers is important in this change; perhaps, compared to the establishment of compulsory courses, it is slight. For instance, Betsy Jolas, teaching at the Paris Conservatoire, admits that in her composition-class (an elective one) the proportions are usually about twelve men to two women. Even so, it may be worth noting that the two British universities with compulsory composition-classes mentioned above are the only ones with female composition-teachers. And Jolas maintains the importance of women as role-models; she attests – as I do – to lacking the courage to describe herself as a composer until she was almost 30 and feels that having a role-model would have helped her in overcoming this.

While in the United States, I grew to know and admire an educational system which emphasises the importance of an extensive and varied base from which quality may emerge. But there, as here, the pyramid system has not been put into operation as far as women composers are concerned. When so many men compose, much of worth must emerge and receive recognition. We need a broad base for women composers too.

¹ Further information about 'Women in Music' can be obtained from Stephanie Power, W.I.M., 32 Hearnville Road, London SW12 8RR.

Margaret Lucy Wilkins

View from the Industrial North

It is my job as a Senior Lecturer in Composition to teach young composers, in itself quite a revolutionary concept since, not so long ago, it was a widely-held belief that composition could not be taught. Though it must be agreed that the teacher cannot endow the student with the combination of musicality, intellect and aural imagination to become a composer (that is the prerogative of a Higher Being), given that pupils with the necessary requisites do present themselves, then a great deal can be 'taught'. The development of the musical personality, the exploration of the inner self, contact and exchange of ideas with other composers (both peers and the more experienced), expansion of imaginative and intellectual horizons by

studying the music of other contemporary composers, problem-solving within a composition, the sheer practicalities of realising musical ideas on paper or tape, the rehearsal of student compositions in workshop situations – all this is included in the art of teaching composition. There is a distinction to be made between students who have the desire to become Composers (with a capital C) and those who include composition as part of their general musical training. I am constantly amazed in my work at Huddersfield Polytechnic by the output of those in the latter category. Coming, as they very often do, from a musical background which did not include composing (though this situation will shortly change when students who have taken the new GCSE music syllabus come through the system), and being confronted by a course which demands that they do compose, these students, after initial apprehension, make great leaps of imagination into the unknown, unlock their musical creativity and produce pieces which sometimes rival those by students in the former category. It is the teacher's task to enable this to happen, both by encouraging students in their own composition and by introducing them to the ideas and techniques of other 20th-century composers.

But what is all this training for? Where does it lead? The educative value of this work is not in question but, at the end of the day, highly intelligent, talented, trained and motivated young composers are being unleashed into a society which is not structured to give them full employment. This is not the case for their instrumental counterparts who can expect to find full- or part-time work in orchestras and ensembles.

Most people, if asked, have no idea how composers earn their living, generally imagining that composers of 'pop' music are rich and that composers of 'un-pop' music are poor. The latter are supposed to spend their twenties (presumably on the dole since there are no 'jobs' for them) writing the works which will be performed frequently enough to earn sufficient royalties to sustain them during their thirties, by which time they should be commanding adequate commissions to sustain them throughout their forties. Their fiftieth-birthday-year celebrations should produce a batch of performances which will carry them on to their sixtieth-birthday-year celebrations, and so to retirement. In practice, this career structure, if such it be, works for a mere handful. Most composers realise all too soon that they are going to have to diversify their activities in order to make ends meet, and certainly if they have dependants to support. Their 'failure' to command the numbers of performances which would provide an adequate living-standard is often unconnected with the quality of their work. In Britain today there is an unprecedented number of highly talented composers in all fields. Proper financial structures simply do not exist that would enable them to direct their gifts and energies into contributing to the cultural and economic wealth of the nation which took so much trouble to educate them. As it is, most composers have to take other work, which inevitably drains their creative energy. Their compositional activity is relegated to a part-time slot, thus making amateurs out of professionals. In which other walk of life is the professional expected to carry out the job, for which they have been so expensively trained, after a hard day's work doing something else? What does Society think (if Society 'thinks' at all) it gains by preventing its members from engaging in the activity which they are best at performing, when that activity

would benefit its cultural and aesthetic life?

Many composers are attracted to lecturing-positions if only because the vacations offer paid time in which to compose. Such employment is in part dishonest however, since firstly the holder of the post is there because of his or her compositional (not lecturing) experience, itself gained in the aforementioned amateur mode; and secondly because the job itself is not to compose as such, but to teach this skill to others!

Living, as I do, in the Industrial North, I have been considering the position of creators in other walks of life – scientists and industrialists. The mental spark, which artists call 'inspiration', is not their sole prerogative, though jealously guarded by them as though it were. It is the same mental activity experienced by inventors in all fields – a sudden leap of the imagination producing a concept which then takes months of painstaking work to bring to fruition. Some artists foster the notion that this inspiration can only take place in a state of near financial ruin! This does not seem to be the case for inventors in other fields. Scientists and industrialists at the forefront of their commercial enterprises work very well in a state of financial security, indeed affluence. Having composed in both financial extremities myself, I know which economic state produces my best music! In the artistic world, Fame is often seen to make up for lack of Fortune. Scientists, though more wealthy, are much more modest about their achievements. (Who was it that invented the wheel, the pill and the micro-chip?) Do Fame and Fortune have to be exclusive; cannot artists and scientists have both?

Many scientists have achieved their state of financial security because industrial companies employ them, on a good permanent salary with pension, to generate ideas for products for the firm to manufacture and market at home and abroad. Without these design-engineers the company would only be able to produce goods from the existent moulds. Obviously in this sphere of activity it is felt necessary to maintain a steady output of new designs, new products, improved formulae, and to employ the best available minds to ensure that this can happen – not so artistic companies. Where are the orchestras, art galleries, theatre-, dance- and opera-companies which engage teams of playwrights, artists, or composers on a permanent full-time basis to ensure the ongoing creative vitality of their art? It is a hopeful sign that recently the National Theatre Company, the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra and the Scottish Chamber Orchestra have employed composers on just such schemes. Though these projects are embryonic in terms of the duration of employment, and miniscule salaries are offered, it can be hoped that they will be developed into meaningful livelihoods for the artists concerned.

All too often composers see themselves as individuals working against Society. The many composers I know are generous, responsible, assiduous and have great integrity in their attitude to their art. There seems little point in alienating this group of people by ignoring them in practical and economic terms. It is not surprising that some of them respond with alienated music (though this is not an argument in favour of 'cosy' music). Working on a secure basis as members of a team consisting of planners, composers, performers, conductors, copyists, recording technicians and marketeers is an unknown situation for them, though this is the *modus operandi* for their scientific counterparts. The technological revolution which has

taken place this century has been effected by fully-employed scientists. Some of their creations have been far from 'cosy', and whilst some have added to the quality of life, others have been inhuman.

It is often maintained that the artistic product is difficult to 'sell' and is completely dependent on the taste of the somewhat conservative consumer. However, clever marketeers have successfully sold a variety of 'difficult' products to equally conservative customers. Ten years ago, for example, the computer was not a widely owned artefact. It is not even a particularly inexpensive or 'easy' concept, yet nowadays no office, or even home, can apparently function without one. The social value of music is often judged in terms of the numbers of people to whom it appeals, though even in industry, the commercial value of a product is not necessarily judged by the numbers of people who can buy it. Take transport as an example. Many individuals own cars; companies, rather than individuals, own buses, trains and airliners (some are also state-owned); and, at the pinnacle of transportation, rockets for the exploration of outer space are corporately owned (in the USA) by state and company. Comparably, there are musics which appeal to the many; other musics which are appreciated by the artistically aware; and at the forefront of research and development is music which will only interest the connoisseur. There is nothing wrong with this state of affairs. It is a natural pyramid. But, just as the various modes of vehicular transport are designed and manufactured within a viable economic framework, so must be all modes of musical transport. The annual Oxbridge 'milk-round' searches out the brightest young minds and lures them into the financial/business world with salaries which make their parents gasp! Where are the Arts Organisations – needful as any others of managers and financiers – on these 'milk-rounds'?

Ironically, it is just at this moment that industrialists are finding life difficult. Redundant design-engineers are finding themselves in the same freelance-market situation as artists. The slogan 'Buy British' never did apply to artistic products. Consequently, artists have learnt to accept competition from abroad, in addition to that from the dead! Every piece of work has to be fought for on a one-off basis. The individual has to conceive, produce and sell each item in isolation. Unfortunately it seems that scientists are becoming more like artists in their work situation, rather than the other way round, and we are in danger of ending up with the worst of both worlds.

This is a time of social change. Many of the 'old orders' are being questioned and undermined, some with justification, others not. Let us hope that the situation for artists can be made to improve. An intelligent society capitalizes on the talents of its people rather than ignoring them. Currently there is no vision, no political will to harness the artistic talents of the nation to the economy of the nation. The state art-funding body is being whittled away, not to be replaced by a better system, but to be replaced by nothing. This must not be allowed to happen. Aesthetic values are high in this country. The quality and quantity of the intelligentsia is increasing. There is a wealth of creative talent, an increasing appreciation of cultural experiences and an educated public. In this climate, it must be possible to devise financial structures which will enable artists to make their contributions to Society without debilitating personal financial worries. Investment in this area can be made

to produce both economic and cultural wealth. Constructive thinking and financial expertise must be directed at this problem and, if proper solutions are found, my job as a Senior Lecturer in Composition will seem more purposeful, and the young composers emerging from their musical education can have a future working *for* Society rather than *against* it.

Trevor Wishart

Performance, Notation, Time

Music is an experience in sound. What is important (from a compositional point of view) is the relationship between the composer's intentions and the listener's aural experience as mediated by the performer. In fact, the performer may be the (instantaneous) composer of the music, or there may be neither score nor performer (as in some tape-music or studio-produced rock). A composer's ability should be measured in terms of his or her capacity to mould this aural experience. The notated text, where it exists, is a means to an end and not an end in itself, except in some academic circles.

With text-based music, performance difficulty is only valid up to the point where the intelligent listener can tell that the performer's effort is making a difference to the musical experience. In this context, the intelligent listener should be taken to include a very much wider group than those persons who have just spent the last three years writing a PhD thesis on the composer in question. By the musical experience is meant the *aural experience* of the music *and* something more than that; not just the observation that what is in the text has, or has not, been played.

This distinction is important from the point of view of the performer. Why should a performer bother to struggle with a difficult or complex notational procedure if it makes no difference to the audience when they don't get it quite right (or even when they get it completely wrong)? (Among a small circle of devotees there is the question of musical *machismo* – A is the performer who can actually perform the notations in B's piece – but this is a somewhat parochial concern.)

It is also important from the point of view of compositional methodology. 'Making a difference' does not mean merely that, following the *text*, one notices whether the performer played E flat instead of D, or *ffffff* instead of *ffffff*, but that in playing these deviations from the text a significant change in the musical experience took place. If it did not, then any rigorous procedure used to derive that E flat or *ffffff* marking in the score is not a *necessary* one – though it may be a *sufficient* one – in relation to the musical experience engendered.

Such consideration begs the question of what constitutes a significant change in the musical experience. If the latter is to be *defined* in terms of the notated text then any deviation from that text will necessarily alter it . . . but this is mere tautology. There has to be some definition of musical experience which transcends its description in terms of the contents of a score, for any meaningful discussion of this issue to take place. Otherwise the text-composer is free to define any of his/her notations as a valid musical experience, and musical discussion comes down to an argument about the rigorousness of competing text-writing methods.

Taking the argument one step further, analysis of music should best consist of:

- a) Analysing the aural experience of the music in great detail, without ever seeing the score or reading about the composer's intentions.
- b) Only then looking at the score and investigating the composer's methodology.
- c) Comparing the perceived aural structure of the music with the composer's methodology, and ascertaining whether the composer's approach is i) sufficient and ii) necessary to account for the aural experience.

Only in this way can any objective assessment of the composer's methodology be made. Unfortunately much contemporary analysis seems to equate its task with uncovering the composer's methodology as evidenced in the notational procedures used; this is, no doubt, an interesting occupation, but it is text-methodology analysis, not *music* analysis.

The result tends to be ideological debate about whether methodology A is superior to methodology B, and it becomes a matter of definition or belief as to which direction is to be favoured. This 'idealist' (in the philosophical sense) approach to musical matters makes for lots of verbally weighty articles in journals, and reputations rise and fall upon it.

My semi-empirical approach (anathema!) would first ascertain whether, and to what extent, the compositional procedure was *valid* (i.e. either sufficient or necessary to the perceived musical experience) before making any judgement about its value. This approach again raises the difficult problem of explaining how to define what 'works' or 'makes a difference' about a musical experience. A simple, but intellectually annoying, answer would be that being a musician involves having an intuitive insight into at least some aspects of this question (though that insight might be restricted by social conditioning and therefore need to be tempered by a very wide and generous approach to musical study). A more intellectually satisfying answer may be that the solution lies in the realm of human physiology/psychology, human history and social/environmental experience. We can learn from the existing musical traditions of the world, from a study of psycho-acoustics and from much else. The matter is not, however, purely one of *definition*.

The question of the notation of time is also closely related to this issue. What matters about a particular time-structure is that which we experience. To discuss this very briefly: if there are no markers within the *aural* experience for us to perceive *specific* complex relationships of pulse taking place, (for example, clearly established and repeating pulse-accents in different tempi, as in my VOX-3) then we will forego such a *specific* perception, and experience only a sense of the absence of pulse – a certain sense of scatter or dislocation, or something else.

We lose perceptual detail at the lowest level and jump to a higher level of the grouping of events to look for patterning. This musical experience can be replaced quite happily *in its fine details* by one closely similar without making any qualitative difference, and in such a case we should choose the notational procedure and the grouping of note-values (through barring, for example) which is easiest to read and/or realise. All else is merely the ideology of textual-method.

This approach requires a certain candour from 'text-composers' about their capabilities. It is unfortunately an easy and intellectually respectable activity to hide behind an ideology of method and accuse the performer of inadequacy, or the listener of having cloth ears.