

The future of chamber music...(?)

Lecture given at Seinäjoki Chamber Music Contest, Finland

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First of all I would like to thank you for giving me this opportunity to share some of my thoughts about chamber music in general – and especially contemporary chamber music.

When I saw the theme of today's seminar I came to think of an old story from the 1960'ies, where the famous Hungarian composer György Ligeti was invited to give a lecture at a university congress for German musicologists. The subject of the lecture was "*The future of music*". Ligeti only accepted the invitation on certain conditions: He wanted 15 minutes, and under no circumstances would he accept any interruption – whatever he might do or say.

When the day came he stood up in front of all the dignified and clever people in the hall – and kept his mouth shut. And he kept on saying nothing, nothing, nothing. Meanwhile he wrote down the reactions from the audience in a sort of log book. Funny remarks in the beginning, but as time passed on and still nothing happened the statements from the hall became more and more aggressive until the culmination after eight minutes or so, when he was brutally torn down from the podium and violently dismissed from the conference. This happening actually is mentioned on Ligeti's list of works.

Can we say anything reasonable at all about the future of music? Ligeti apparently meant No – but anyway: I have promised Mikko and the arrangers of this seminar to try to be a bit more talking than he was...

On a fine chamber music festival like this, I hope you will excuse me for taking the role of the devil's advocate. For though an event like this helps to keep up the spirit, I still think there are some dark clouds in the future.

Someone once asked the Danish composer Per Nørgård: "What is your wish for musicians and composers of the future?". And he answered: "That they will feel some kind of relevance in society. That the ivory tower will not be used as an excuse for not relating to society." A quite remarkable answer from a major contemporary composer!

But if creative art – and especially contemporary music – should gain more relevance in society, it certainly calls for an active strategy. Both politically and aesthetically.

Nothing in society seems to work in favour of greater diversity of music in the near future. Perhaps on longer terms, who knows! - small signs can sometimes be seen of a breakthrough of a new "enlightenment" or a need at least from some people for a deeper and more sophisticated way of communication than just mainstream entertainment or fast CNN headlines. But at the moment it seems more likely that the commercial media and music industry will improve – with the obvious results: loss of values and tradition.

It becomes more and more difficult to create any public awareness of what is going on in contemporary music – or in classical music, for that sake. Compared to film, visual arts, theatre and literature it is amazing how invisible serious music is.

There are several reasons for that. We live in times where there is no longer *a priori* this fundamental goodwill and formal respect around new or classical music. The new generation of decision makers, whether they are politicians, journalists, artistic directors of festivals, broadcasters, you name it..., are children of the '68 cultural revolution. Their musical heritage is not opera, symphonies, chamber music or amateur choirs, and certainly not contemporary art music. It is rock, jazz, folk, world music etc.

Moderne decision makers question *the use of art*. They want a clear answer to "why do we need art?", "why should we support art?", or "what role does art play for modern human beings?". Bad times for a project like *l'art pour l'art*.

This tendency is not linked to certain political parties or movements, it is a matter of generations. So we can't just sit down and hope for someone else to win the next election and help us to bring back the good old days. We must realize that what was formerly looked upon as genuine respected artistic quality, is today regarded as a self-referring, isolated and therefore suspicious way of defending ourselves and our old privileges. As an expert tyranny. Who is greatest: Walt Whitman or Walt Disney? And who on earth has the right to answer such a question!?

In other words: Artistic quality is no longer something that can be defined only from the work itself. It is regarded and defined by public society in relation to what kind of impression the work makes. And on how many!

This new situation should be met by us NOT as a threat, but as a challenge. It forces us to find good and offensive answers to a long row of new interesting questions. And it forces us to redefine the fundamental conditions of our work, whether we are composers, musicians, music teachers, concert arrangers, or anything else.

When we look back in history we will find no example of an art form surviving without any relation to the common society of its time. Artists do not have to be loved by people, but they have to be *recognized*. How do we conquer the cultural agenda again?

Well, today's theme is chamber music. I will speak mostly about contemporary chamber music, but many of my points will probably be relevant also for classical chamber music.

This genre has always been the most exclusive area in art music. Just look at the name: music, meant to be played in a small room, perhaps even under private circumstances. In the classical era chamber music was often used as a medium for formal or aesthetic experiments. Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven wrote some of their most radical and experimental pieces for such small

ensembles. But then, afterwards, they carried with them the most significant results from their "laboratories" and implemented them in the "great" public tradition – in operas, symphonies, church music, oratorios, wherever they might catch a greater audience.

Today the situation is different. Chamber music has become a genre of its own. And it has become *the* genre of contemporary music. Very few composers of today have regular contact with the major music institutions, so there is no longer a forum for presenting the results for a main audience.

Unfortunately it seems to me that many contemporary composers feel quite satisfied with this. They enjoy living in this splendid isolation, as long as no-one disturbs them – and they can keep up governmental support...

But this is not a lasting reality! Producing a project like this fine chamber music competition is very very expensive. It requires ten musicians on a high level (at least 5 or 6 years of education each), it demands a good concert hall, a professional jury, lecturers, administration etc. If you count it all out, I guess that each sold ticket represents the value of up to a thousand Euro! We must prepare to have extremely good arguments for that.

Why don't we split the chamber music scene in different ways of doing things and different purposes?

Of course we will always need a forum for experiments. But why then do we present these experiments as final "works" on concerts in a sort of look-alike symphonic concept? Musicians dressed in black enter the stage, bow, play, get applause, bow again and leave, without saying a word. Why don't we restore the concept of a "private" chamber? Where (a small) audience meet, have something to eat and drink (even together with the musicians), a work is performed and immediately after discussed... then another drink, another work, another discussion.

Such a concept will of course primarily attract a professional audience, or an audience of specialists and enthusiasts. But what is the difference – this is case even today!

Later, after such a series of private concerts, you could arrange a tour with some of the best works. And such a tour should then be presented like a rock tour, eventually with stage directing, lighting, dance, video – whatever. And very important: before the tour the ensemble should make sure to have a cd- or (even better) a DVD-production of the repertoire which can be for sale.

No rock band of today would dream of releasing a cd without also producing a music video of it. Why don't we make music videos? When I listen to new music I often find it very imaginative. It almost tells me a story. Why not let a visual artist bring such a story to life?

Or even more blasphemous: Why not present e.g. a fashion show with contemporary chamber music instead of dull mainstream pop?

We must untie the image of chamber music from this aura of exclusivity and tradition. We must learn from the powerful results of other art forms or other musical genres. Chamber music does not *have to* be presented in the frames of stiff or confined rituals: sit quietly on your chair, don't applaud between the movements, don't speak to anyone... Such rituals create the same barrier for itself as religious rituals. Going to an ordinary chamber music concert is almost like going to church.

I have always found it very strange that composers and musicians who are so radical in their musical language stick so unmoveable to ancient liturgical performances.

I am sure we need a chamber music scene in the future. But it is very important that we encourage composers and musicians to find new ways to share the treasures of their repertoire with the rest of the world. Short time ago I went to a theatre performance in Denmark of a new, rather experimental play. The line for the box office queued several house blocks down the road. And I stood there in the line asking myself: how many of these people – cultural, well-educated, with good taste – know anything about contemporary music? Probably very few.

We have to address this audience. We have to improve our ability to communicate. We shall not abandon experiments, concerts or festivals for a small, professional audience of insiders. But it must never be enough for us to just confirm each other in our own greatness. Diversity is not only a matter of allowing an exclusive music style to survive, it is also the challenge to broaden it out and to approach a new potential audience in as many ways as possible. True diversity is not only to secure the existence of manifold – it is also to improve the public awareness of it.

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