

## *International new music festivals*

A sense of the international new music landscape takes shape through attendance at festivals far and wide, and by following the programming of those that one can't attend. In fact, the festival circuit plays an active role in the development of the new music community, as a set of immersive experiences that foster ongoing dialogue between its stakeholders.

A degree of familiarity with the festival circuit raises a number of questions both specific and general, including:

- What kind of stylistic breadth is represented within a given festival? What kind of stylistic breadth is represented within the festival circuit as a whole?
- How closely does any stylistic bias reflect the interests of a broader musical community?
- Is there a stated theme? If so, how tightly controlled is it?
- Is the programming reliably interesting from one year to the next?
- Who is responsible for the programming?
- How wide is the spectrum from upcoming to established composers, and where is the emphasis placed?
- How much emphasis is put on individual composers?
- How are festivals different from one country to another? In what ways is it possible to draw distinctions and parallels based on national borders?
- How international is the scope of a given festival? How international is the scope of the circuit as a whole?
- How are they funded?

From the point of view of a new-music enthusiast, festival attendance represents a significant personal investment, and these are necessary questions in the consideration of whether it is worth the time, the money and the possible discomfort

in the face of the unfamiliar to take it on. Ultimately, there are two major reasons to consider attending a festival.

There is no substitute for hearing new work live. It is not difficult to hear a selection of a festival's offerings within a year of the festival through CD recordings (such as those released by the Donau-eschinger Musiktage), or if there is a radio broadcast the web stream can usually be captured. But it's not unlike the experience of going to a museum gift shop. The work that one person loves the most is unlikely to be reproduced. Beyond the initial curation of a festival, there is another set of decisions about which pieces should be broadcast or marketed, effectively adding a further degree of distance between the listener and broader musical activity. In any case, a reproduction is never going to be as rich as the original. There is a whole context that goes missing.

The second reason to attend is that it is a unique opportunity to be a part of a community that is not defined by locality but by shared musical interests. Composers and performers engaged in new music and its subfields are stretched across various cities, countries, and continents. Festivals provide clusters of events of sufficient depth and interest to draw these musicians together, keeping them apprised of current accomplishments in their field and providing opportunities for dialogue. The relationships that develop in higher education and in one's own community are rarely sufficient to

sustain a composer in his or her development for the years to come. For those who are invested in knowing and responding to what is being written, not just by their friends and neighbours, but by the composers whose musical concerns resonate with their own, festivals are a key resource.

In an effort to map the landscape of new music festivals, I've described a number of events according to their most distinguishing, usually self-described features. This article attempts a broad-brushed orientation, and can in no way be comprehensive. There is no doubt that there are great new music festivals, both small and large, that have gone unmentioned. While every effort was made to be aesthetically inclusive, it's unreasonable to expect that the preoccupations of the author wouldn't manifest in some way. As such, festivals that include or feature experimental music are more likely to be mentioned than those that do not. There are also some festivals that, while substantial and quite interesting, do not have an active web presence, which makes them more difficult to find, research, and cover.

### Major international festivals of new music

Some of the festivals that squarely fit each of those five words are described below in their own words:

**Ars musica:** "One of the targets for the coming years is to change the perception of the classical music of today. Ars Musica wishes to develop a larger audience for a music who often has difficulties finding a right audience."<sup>1</sup>

**Borealis:** "Borealis is a festival for contemporary music, noise and sound art."<sup>2</sup>

**Donaueschinger Musiktage:** "The Donaueschinger Musiktage comprise the oldest festival for new music worldwide and the richest in tradition. Founded in 1921 under royal protection, it stands even today for all new experimental forms in the category of live music and sound art. Music history has been and is being written here in Donaueschingen."<sup>3</sup>

1 <http://www.arsmusica.be/about>, accessed 30 April 2011.

2 <http://borealisfestival.no/2011/info/>, accessed 30 April 2011.

3 <http://www.swr.de/swr2/donaueschingen/ueberuns/-/id=2136968/16bagus/index.html>, accessed 30 April 2011.

Translation by the author.

**Huddersfield contemporary music festival:** "HCMF aims to provide life-changing and unique artistic experiences to as wide an audience as possible; to be an international platform for new music and related contemporary art forms in Britain; to enthuse existing audiences and draw in new ones through adventurous programming and informed, stylish presentation and to be an active cultural partner within the region."<sup>4</sup>

**MaerzMusik:** "MaerzMusik is a direct reaction to new relations between sound and society today. The festival for contemporary music transcends the borders between tradition and innovation. With its broad range of orchestral and chamber music, innovative musical theatre, experimental works and media art it provides a fascinating and rich panorama of contemporary music.... Each year there are thematic focuses, and the festival concentrates on music from specific regions.... MaerzMusik stands for openness – and this is the festival's recipe for success."<sup>5</sup>

**Ultima Oslo:** "One of Ultima's primary objectives is to contribute to offering a broad representation of the contemporary music genre, combining a keen interest in innovation and an awareness of tradition."<sup>6</sup>

**Warsaw Autumn:** "It is said – appropriately – that the Warsaw Autumn is positively eclectic. That is the way it has to be, if the festival wants to inform its Polish audience about what is going on in the musical world as fully as possible – which is what it wants to do and what it should do.... Warsaw Autumn consistently maintains its credibility as a place, where independent and disinterested art, free from commercial aspects, is cultivated."<sup>7</sup>

**Wien Modern:** "Wien Modern sees itself today as a forum for the rich diversity of contemporary music and a network to other media."<sup>8</sup>

4 <http://www.hcmf.co.uk/page/show/1>, accessed 30 April 2011.

5 <http://www.facetivals.com/MaerzMusik-Festival-of-Contemporary-Music>, accessed 30 April 2011.

6 <http://www.ultima.no/en/about-ultima/83-bakgrunn>, accessed 30 April 2011.

7 <http://www.warsaw-autumn.art.pl/05/aboutthefestival.html>, accessed 30 April 2011.

8 <http://www.wienmodern.at/Archive/tabid/137/language/en-US/Default.aspx>, accessed 30 April 2011.

Unlike the festivals above, which are clearly centered around music, the Paris-based **Festival d'Automne**<sup>9</sup> is a festival of contemporary arts, also including dance, theater, and film.

Within these largest festivals, there are corners of activity to be found, such as the student-oriented off-program at Donaueschingen, complete with multiple concerts. Extended installation events often run parallel to significant festivals, which are promising opportunities to find like-minded people. Even when there are no directly overlapping events, there are always decisions to be made about what to attend and how to direct one's energy, what events to miss because of an overall jet-lagged exhaustion and instinct for self-preservation, and what pieces to listen to with the greatest degree of attention.

### Of special interest to student composers and performers

While these events do not all strictly fall under the umbrella of festivals, they are clusters of events around new music with an educational emphasis, usually known as summer institutes or courses. Features to look for here include the degrees of emphasis on conversation, workshops, and performances, the depth and mix of student and non-student composer programming, the permanent and year-to-year faculty, and the presence or absence of a student performers' program.

Acanthes<sup>10</sup>

Bang on a Can Summer Music Festival<sup>11</sup>

Darmstädter Ferienkurse für Neue Musik<sup>12</sup>

Dartington International Summer School<sup>13</sup>

Harvard Summer Institute for Music Composition

Impuls<sup>14</sup>

International Moscow Ensemble Academy<sup>15</sup>

June in Buffalo<sup>16</sup>

Lucerne Festival Academy<sup>17</sup>

9 <http://www.festival-automne.com/>

10 <http://www.acanthes.com/>

11 [http://bangonacan.org/summer\\_festival](http://bangonacan.org/summer_festival)

12 <http://www.internationales-musikinstitut.de/>

13 <http://www.dartington.org/summer-school>

14 <http://www.impuls.cc/>

15 <http://www.mcme.thereimin.ru/moscowensemble-a.html>

16 <http://www.music.buffalo.edu/juneinbuffalo/>

17 [http://www.lucernefestival.ch/en/lucerne\\_festival\\_academy/the\\_academy/](http://www.lucernefestival.ch/en/lucerne_festival_academy/the_academy/)

Ostrava Days Institute and Festival<sup>18</sup>

Rencôntres de Musique Nouvelle (Domaine Forget)<sup>19</sup>

Sommerakademie Schloß Solitude<sup>20</sup>

Summer Institute for Contemporary Performance Practice (SICPP aka "Sick Puppy")<sup>21</sup>

Takefu International Music Festival<sup>22</sup>

Tanglewood<sup>23</sup>

Tokyo Wonder Site<sup>24</sup>

Tzlil Meudcan<sup>25</sup>

Voix Nouvelles (Abbaye de Royaumont)<sup>26</sup>

A number of festivals make a clear effort to mix more established composers with younger ones, while others isolate the two types of programming, or do just one or the other. The competition of the **Gaudeamus Music Week**<sup>27</sup> is limited to composers under the age of 30. Darmstadt separates student concerts from the rest of the programming, which may serve as a protection to the younger composers. The range of the spectrum of the programming from young to established composers has much to do with who shows up and for how long, how people interact, and the resultant overall atmosphere of collegiality or criticism, constructive or otherwise.

### Permanent orientations

**Moving Sounds**<sup>28</sup> and **Soundwaves**<sup>29</sup> both define themselves as cutting edge. **Zukunftsmusik** and **Transit** use the words "innovative"<sup>30</sup> and "adventurous"<sup>31</sup>, respectively, to describe their pro-

18 <http://www.newmusicostrava.cz/en/ostrava-days-institute/>

19 <http://www.domaineforget.com/1/stages/rencontres-de-musique-nouvelle>

20 [http://www.akademie-solitude.de/810\\_sac\\_principles.php](http://www.akademie-solitude.de/810_sac_principles.php)

21 <http://sicpp.org/>

22 <http://takefu.typepad.jp/web/2010/04/the-21-th-takef.html>

23 [http://www.bso.org/bso/mods/toc\\_01\\_gen\\_noSubCat.jsp?id=bc5240076](http://www.bso.org/bso/mods/toc_01_gen_noSubCat.jsp?id=bc5240076)

24 <http://www.tokyo-ws.org/english/>

25 <http://www.ensemblenikel.com/MARATHON.asp>

26 [http://www.royaumont.com/fondation\\_abbaye/Session\\_de\\_composition.1619.o.html](http://www.royaumont.com/fondation_abbaye/Session_de_composition.1619.o.html)

27 <http://www.muziekcentrumnederland.nl/en/contemporary/gaudeamus-music-week/>

28 <http://www.argentomusic.org/movingsounds/>

29 <http://arts.brighton.ac.uk/soundwaves>

30 [http://www.zukunftsmusik-das-festival.de/index.php?file=tl\\_files/PDF/Future%20Music.pdf](http://www.zukunftsmusik-das-festival.de/index.php?file=tl_files/PDF/Future%20Music.pdf), accessed 30 April 2011.

31 <http://www.festivalvlaamsbrabant.be/node/79>, accessed 30 April 2011.

gramming.

**Moscow Forum** includes older pieces than might be expected in a new music festival, but has a particular reason for doing so: it has set itself the task, not only of presenting the newest music, but “the integration of contemporary Russian music into an overall European cultural context.”<sup>32</sup> Given the separation of Russian culture from developments in western Europe for much of the twentieth century, this may be regarded as more necessary than outside the former USSR.

The **Wittener Tage für neue Kammermusik**<sup>33</sup> are unusual in that they are explicitly focused on chamber music. Many festivals take this orientation as a de facto stance, for financial or logistical reasons. In this case it is a formative and permanent feature of the festival.

**Extension festival de création musicale**<sup>34</sup>, founded in Paris by Luc Ferrari in 1982, focuses on cross-disciplinary aspects of contemporary music.

### Budget, backing, and independence

In looking up these various festivals online, it is easy to look directly at the programming for that year, rather than seeking out the particular affiliations, hosts, funders, and curators of the festival. Ultimately, the programming (including the lineup of performers) will provide most of the major reasons to go or not go. But a knowledge of who and what is driving the festival is crucial to developing an understanding of it.

What does a big budget make possible? What can happen on a shoestring? A festival will be interesting if the programming and the players are good. Money is not the only factor in that set of decisions. While it might be tempting to emphasise or seek out the largest festivals, what really matters is the total amount of music one wants to hear. (It is also often easier to get to know the people involved in a small festival than a large one).

Institutional independence provides aesthetic (if not financial) freedom for musicians that have a

<sup>32</sup> [http://mosforumfest.ru/files/moscow\\_forum\\_mission-en.pdf](http://mosforumfest.ru/files/moscow_forum_mission-en.pdf), accessed 30 April 2011.

<sup>33</sup> <http://www.wittenerstage.de/festival11.htm>

<sup>34</sup> <http://parisartbook.com/2011/04/24/extension-festival-de-la-creation-musicale/>

particular interest. A number of festivals that center on experimental music were begun on the initiative of one or several composers. Gustavo Matamoros began the **Subtropics**<sup>35</sup> festival in Miami, and Peter Ablinger organised **Klangwerkstatt**<sup>36</sup> in Berlin. In London, **Music we'd like to hear**<sup>37</sup> is curated by three composers: John Lely, Tim Parkinson, and Markus Trunk. In San Francisco, Charles Amirkhanian's **Other minds**<sup>38</sup> is devoted to “originals and outsiders in avant-garde music.” Peter Kotík has cited “independence from the music establishment” as an important feature of **Ostrava days**, and goes on to say that “At Ostrava days, we are trying to create an environment that can foster unexpected and important influences.”<sup>39</sup>

Other festivals are affiliated with a particular league, society, or group. Some of these groups are well-established and well-funded, and others are more ad hoc, but these festivals share the trait that they are explicitly linked to that organisation. Several of these events happen in various cities throughout the world, or, in the case of the **Asian Composers League Festival**<sup>40</sup>, the relevant region. The **ICMC**<sup>41</sup> (International Computer Music Conference) happens annually under the auspices of the International Computer Music Association. The International Society for Contemporary Music's **World New Music Days**<sup>42</sup> festival is hosted in turn by various member countries.

Two festivals that are more fixed in location and specific in orientation are the **Microfest**<sup>43</sup> in Los Angeles, dedicated to non-standard tunings, and the **Echtzeitmusiktage**<sup>44</sup>, which are put on by a loosely knit group of experimental musicians, sound artists, and improvisers in Berlin.

Yet another group of festivals (and there must be many more of these) are hosted by universities. (Huddersfield's does not fit squarely within this category, since the university is only one of its

<sup>35</sup> <http://subtropics.org/>

<sup>36</sup> <http://www.klangwerkstatt-berlin.de/2011/>

<sup>37</sup> <http://www.musicwedliketohear.com/>

<sup>38</sup> <http://www.otherminds.org/>

<sup>39</sup> <http://www.newmusicostrava.cz/en/ostrava-days/petr-kotik-about-ostrava-days>, accessed 30 April 2011.

<sup>40</sup> <http://www.asiancomposersleague.com/>

<sup>41</sup> <http://www.computermusic.org/page/23/>

<sup>42</sup> <http://www.iscm.org/>

<sup>43</sup> <http://www.microfest.org/>

<sup>44</sup> <http://festival2010.echtzeitmusik.de/>

many affiliations.) The **Spark Festival of Electronic Music and Arts**<sup>45</sup> is hosted by the University of Minnesota. The **Dog Star Orchestra**<sup>46</sup> is an experimental music festival that comes out of CalArts and is curated by Michael Pisaro. At Bowling Green State University, the Mid-American Center for Contemporary Music hosts an annual **Bowling Green New Music Festival**<sup>47</sup>.

Many of the largest festivals have significant state funding, which comes through either the radio, as is often the case in Germany, at **Donaueschingen, Witten**, and **Ultraschall**<sup>48</sup>, among others, or by an institution such as IRCAM (**Agora**)<sup>49</sup>.

### Annual focus

Many festivals have stated themes from one year to the next, some of which are more telling than others about the nature of the programming. The **Spor**<sup>50</sup> festival puts these themes front and center in the title: “Spor2010 Exploded Music”, “Spor2009 Public Disturbance”, “Spor2008 The Public Experiment”, etc.

In most other cases, the announcement of a featured composer is a stronger indicator of whether a festival might be interesting for that year. **hcmf** usually has one composer in residence, while **Wien Modern** will have anywhere from two to upwards of six composers in focus.

It is not difficult to assess the interest a program holds according to the list of scheduled performers. An artistic director will naturally seek out the musicians who specialise in the type of repertoire that is being programmed. There may be some give and take, but there is no reason to go completely against the grain. Beyond that, some ensembles routinely attract sizeable audiences, no matter what repertoire they are playing.

Ultimately, the best advance indicator of the interest a festival holds is the complete program. This is usually available several months before the fes-

45 <http://spark.umn.edu/>

46 <http://dogstarorchestra.org/>

47 <http://www.bgsu.edu/colleges/music/MACCM/festival/BGNMF2011/index.html>

48 <http://www.dradio.de/dkultur/sendungen/ultraschall/1344889/>

49 <http://agora.ircam.fr/>

50 <http://www.sporfestival.dk/>

tival itself: long enough to decide whether or not to make travel plans.

### The big picture

As I was working on this article, I referred to a large list of festivals I began to compile several years ago. It was quite sad to realise just how many of those festivals have folded in the short space of three years. In this economic climate, funding is always an issue. Regional or national politics can have a negative impact as well. But then there are new festivals being created too, like **Sound of Stockholm**<sup>51</sup>. It's worth pointing out the obvious for a moment: that there are many new music festivals in Europe and relatively few elsewhere. This wide array still looks quite glamorous to my American eyes, but on closer contact it's quickly learned that the funding has been scaled back quite a lot.

Stepping back and looking at the broader picture, it is an extraordinary thing to do on any scale, to create a program of multiple days of new music. It takes time and money and persistent effort. It takes a confluence of circumstances and an ongoing determination. For some artistic directors, it is their job. For others, it occupies them as a second, often virtually or actually unpaid, profession.

Ultimately, a festival is a situation that allows for something really special to happen. Composers, performers, administrators, and (hopefully) members of the wider community come together with a common and specific interest in the music they are there to hear. Not everyone will like everything. But when a program works, the performance is committed, and the audience is receptive, it is something completely unlike the normal experience of hearing a token new music piece at an orchestral concert. It is an unmistakable and unforgettable experience. Three or five or ten days will become those moments, when everyone was there to listen, and everyone was listening to something new and bold and great. There will be many less inspiring experiences, as well as those when everyone else in the audience seems deaf to the fascination a piece holds. But when something really works, there is a special exhilaration, to have made that decision to go, to have traveled all that way, and for it to have been so very much worth it.

51 <http://soundofstockholm.se/content/sound-stockholm-2011-pa-kulturhuset>

---

**Jennie Gottschalk** is a composer based in Boston, USA. Her freelance editorial work allows for frequent travel to new music events, which she writes about at [www.soundexpanse.com](http://www.soundexpanse.com). She holds a bachelor's degree in composition from The Boston Conservatory (2001), and a master's degree and doctorate from Northwestern University (2008). Teachers have included Larry Bell, Yakov Gubanov, Jay Alan Yim, Augusta Read Thomas, and Aaron Cassidy. Recent performances in Los Angeles (Dog Star Orchestra), Chicago (Northwestern University Symphony Orchestra and Contemporary Music Ensemble), Charleston (New Music Collective), and London (music we'd like to hear). Her dissertation and current work explore connections between American pragmatist thought and experimental music.