



University of  
HUDDERSFIELD

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## *Mediating the technical abyss*

### **working with composers in a pedagogical setting**

The departure point of this article is the idea of the abyss, unfathomable, indefinable, perhaps dark and uninviting, perhaps warm and bright, inviting exploration. This is a metaphor for what initially separates performer and composer, at any stage of their respective lives and careers. The stuff of the abyss is the language and fundamentals of classical music, and the mutual knowledge-base of both parties. What defines the dimensions of the abyss are the levels of specialisation or experience that each party brings to the site. The wonderful thing about the outset of this 'partnership' is that both are hoping to close the gap in the course of working together. Both performer and composer have reached a high level of technical ability in their fields, and thus respect and understand each other on this level.

In the framework of a university, conservatorium or festival/academy-based course, meeting a composer for the first time, having been asked to workshop their music, can be one of the most sensitive personal exchanges that a performing musician may experience in their working lives. Contained within this exchange, is a complex cocktail of feelings such as expectancy, fear, confidence, uncertainty, hope and self-doubt. Being relatively fresh out of studying performance at university, and still being a student (PhD) myself, I have found that I share these feelings that form a wonderful energy that drives the situation.

It is impossible to conclusively generalise about these kinds of meetings. The personality, aura and body language of performer and composer will determine much to do with how each other's demands and suggestions are interpreted, even if the performer is in a position of 'intellectual/artistic authority' (with which I strongly disagree as long as a decent level of interpersonal respect is observed). However, I'm going to attempt to relay some information based on my experiences working with composers at various institutions.

Something that I feel should be made clear at this point is that, despite the saviour-like manifestation of a visiting musician that specialises in the performance of contemporary music, the role of

the performer in this scenario must be understood as that of (merely) a giver of advice: someone that is in a position to *assess* and *assist* the music (and the manifold details contained therein) from an instrument-specific standpoint, that has particular experience and expertise in the area of contemporary music performance, and not, as it may be in the context of working, for example, towards the premiere of a work at a festival, of an interpreter or equal collaborator (as much as, at times, I would like it to be such). It is rather difficult, in the time that is usually given during such workshops, to *completely* revise a composition. In my experience it is usually more productive to address a few problems thoroughly, rather than trying to gloss over the entire work. This hopefully enables the composer to take some very considered and thoroughly understood advice and apply it to other areas of the composition.

One of the greater challenges of working with composers' notated work for a relatively short time, is having to master (often) difficult music, quickly. 'Difficult', I should clarify, may involve standard notation with a high degree of technical or musical difficulty, non-standard notation that is familiar to the performer or non-standard notation that is unfamiliar to the performer. It is impossible to make a generalised statement as to what might be difficult, as this tends to be vary from instrument

to instrument, and very much dependent on the exact constellation of playing techniques, dynamics, articulations, pitches and rhythms. However, one can imagine that a composer who has designed a completely new system of notation (albeit in the experimental stages) using hieroglyphs that pertain to various musical parameters is asking a lot of the performer who may only be doing a read-through of the work in a workshop situation. Certainly, this approach would be most interesting if the contact-time with the composer were similar to that of a full-blown collaboration.

These workshops often occur with the expectation that the composers' works have been practised, rehearsed (if written for ensemble) and to some extent, mastered. This situation can be difficult to manage interpersonally and logistically, and is exacerbated by the delivery of scores close to, or on, the day of the workshop. The level of mastery demonstrated by the performer(s) may reflect upon the quality of the composer's work, or their need to review what they have written. Musical events may not be able to be realised accurately, and the composer may receive a sometimes depressingly incomplete aural picture of their work. In the case of some compositions, particularly those using non-standard notation, it may be impossible to practise what the composer has written as the or notation may rely on a certain amount of indeterminacy or struggle with multiple streams of musical information in order to have the intended effect. Under such circumstances, a read-through workshop will not come close to revealing the depth or quality of these kinds of works. Often, as is my experience performing compositions of this nature, it is not until the general rehearsal that I have an overview of the work, having been imprisoned by the multi-stream notation for weeks or months. The lack of a performance outcome as part of some composer workshops means that this level is not reached and neither the performer nor the composer have the opportunity to experience the work on the level the work may deserve.

It may be helpful at this point to talk about the kind of experience that I enjoy, and hope to have when working with composers in a pedagogical setting (I must qualify this paragraph by stating that the conditions of appointments at institutions and the expectations by the staff of the students are

many and varied, therefore my example is independent of these). The composer has a score that is rough and incomplete (scores that are apparently 'finished' are less interesting in the context of a workshop, as for the most part, any changes are regarded as an inconvenience, rather than an opportunity), for example, most of the piece has been mapped out, most of it notated using their chosen style be it standard, graphic, tablature etc. Perhaps there are still some gaps in the structure or room to move things around. Extended techniques (if present) are detailed in terms of their tessitura and character, but many elements remain open to discussion. This kind of score allows for a great deal of exploration, and allows the composer to focus on musical elements of the work *prior* to the meeting, rather than drowning in technicalities of the (perhaps largely unknown) instrument. Following the meeting, then, the composer will have engaged with the musical/structural elements thoroughly, and the technical/instrument-specific elements thoroughly, and this may be the right kind of process to have undertaken in order to finish the piece subsequent to the performer's departure.

What this scenario also demands is time, and a fair chunk of it. Both composer and performer need multiple sessions together, as well as time apart. For the composer, time apart could mean reviewing and employing suggestions made by the performer, renovating the musical canvas to accommodate them. For the performer, time apart can often mean learning new techniques, or practising known techniques to suit the unfamiliar context of the composer's work and finding sounds or solutions to problems that may have come up during discussion time with the composer. Ultimately, what arises is music that *works* on the instrument for which it is written and the composer and performer have learned a great deal through the process. Some of the most successful works I've worked on, have received a small amount of this treatment, and have stayed true to the composer's original idea. This process is not about streamlining a composer's work into a performer's technical abilities but allowing both parties' technical expertise to collaboratively grow to realise a new musical work.

Writing for the clarinet is, fortunately, something

many composers have done a great deal of. We have a rich repertoire, one that has exploded in volume in the latter-half of the twentieth century, as well as players who have done a fair amount of documented research into extended techniques. Extended techniques will always remain a point of discussion: as much as we standardise styles of notation or playing techniques, these sounds will almost always be slightly different from player to player, just as each player has their own unique fundamental sound. This makes the composer's job no easier, especially if they want *that* sound from *that* recording or performance by another performer. The topic of extended techniques is too vast to address within this article, but an approach to them may be derived from the confines of these pages.

Much of the conversation during workshops revolves around the difficult or unachievable. If I were to critically comment on the integrity of the music by a composer, in a workshop environment, they'd be unlikely to listen to anything else I had to say, and they'd be unlikely to put any of my concrete technical suggestions to use. So the conversation tends to remain on the objective elements. I find this unfortunate because it may lead composers who are viewing the workshop to believe that the major hurdle of writing music today is getting a grasp on concrete technical elements of instruments, and the extended techniques that have grown out of them. The correction or improvement of technical elements of a score should hopefully always be with a view to improving the clarity of musical expression.

Certainly half the challenge of this this exchange is communication: communicating that this particular technique sounds different on my particular setup, or with my physical attributes; or communicating that a particular sound may have arisen through improvisation, the probability of reliably producing the sound again, in a controlled manner, may be low. Regardless, in this environment, the performing musician needs to have a great depth of technical resource in order to even undertake a discussion of 'what is possible', or being able to offer alternatives to a composer's desired sonic event.

Finally, as a quasi-appendix, I offer up four kinds

of composers and four kinds of performers (picked from a vast array of possible archetypes), to incite consideration on how each combination of scenarios would unfold. As detailed earlier in the article, my pick of the bunch would be the more collaborative **C<sub>3</sub> + P<sub>2</sub>** combo.

*Four composer-oriented scenarios that affect how the performer behaves and what kind of assistance they can provide in the workshop:*

- C<sub>1</sub>:** Composer has written a completed work that needs little or no revision.
- C<sub>2</sub>:** Composer has written a completed work that needs much revision.
- C<sub>3</sub>:** Composer has written a full sketch that needs detailed input in order to fill out and complete.
- C<sub>4</sub>:** Composer has written a number of sections of the work and needs feedback in order to continue writing.

*Four performer-oriented scenarios that affect what the composer receives from participating in the workshop (it is assumed that each performer-example has satisfactory classical music training):*

- P<sub>1</sub>:** Performer has little knowledge of, or a conservative attitude toward experimental aspects of technique.
- P<sub>2</sub>:** Performer has a great depth of knowledge of, and boundless attitude toward experimental aspects of technique.
- P<sub>3</sub>:** Performer has little knowledge of, but boundless attitude toward experimental aspects of technique.
- P<sub>4</sub>:** Performer has a great depth of knowledge of, but conservative attitude toward experimental aspects of technique.

Thinking about how each of these sixteen scenarios might play out is encouraging, as they really would all result in quite positive outcomes. The resonance or interference between any two of these scenarios defines the short working rela-

tionship and ultimately contributes immeasurably to the growth of the composition. Irrespective of who might fall into which category, we need to continue to nurture the *act* of 'composer-performer-rendezvous', or whatever we want to call it, allowing the process more time for considered action. The opportunity for composers and performers to work together, whether in the context of an organised, perhaps institutionalised workshop, or in a freely self-organised context is something wonderful, and should be one that is seized and treasured.

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