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## Ritual Versus Performance: The Future of Concert Music

by

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### ***Ritual Versus Performance: The Future of Concert Music***

**P**articipants in and observers of the world of symphonic music regularly use the Internet to seek information, to communicate with one another across vast distances, and simply to explore what is posted at various sites on the World Wide Web. It was during one such exploration that we discovered the writings of Christos Hatzis, a composer and author of the following essay.

#### **The Viability of Concert Music**

The essay opens with Hatzis pondering whose responsibility it is to fund what he calls "high culture." He outlines changes brought about by an increasingly global economy, shifting governmental priorities, and the growing role of corporations in arts funding. He then steps back and traces the history of arts patronage from pre-Renaissance times to the present, drawing the somewhat gloomy conclusion that the stage and record industries support interpretation rather than composition.

#### **A New Paradigm**

Hatzis then turns his attention to musical works composed from the 1960s onward, music that he says adheres to a "New Age" musical paradigm. In language understandable to all readers, he details how changes in composition mirror changes in society.

Arguing that postindustrial information societies suffer from information overload, Hatzis presents the case of a "need for sanctuary," predicting that composition will change in both process and content, becoming what he calls "a spiritual canvas." He concludes the essay on a more optimistic note, encouraging artists to become embodiments of human aspiration and suggesting that the modes of transmission of music in the years ahead will bring composer and listener closer to one another.

## Ritual Versus Performance: The Future of Concert Music

**A**s a composer of primarily concert music, I have often wondered about the viability of what I do and the prospects of my music's survival within a rapidly transforming cultural milieu. It is not the act of composition itself that I question, but whether this activity of composing and presenting the kind of music that interests me is relevant to enough people and to a significant enough degree to merit support through public funds.

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I belong to a generation of composers who were schooled in the modernist tradition. During the 1970s, when I was a university student in composition, this tradition was already questioned by a growing number of professional practitioners, but continued to be the prevailing ideology in academic settings. The questions which were asked then rather quietly by conservative social thinkers, and are now more vocally rearticulated by a greater number of public voices, are as follows: Is it the responsibility of government to support cultural products which are deemed to be important by only a minority of citizens? Is high culture of any benefit to the average citizen who's paying for it with tax money? And if the average citizen thinks high culture is not a benefit, is it not the responsibility of an elected government to incrementally reduce or terminate the funding for the creation and reproduction of such cultural products? Should not special interest communities, such as the arts sector and those who

find unprofitable art of interest and value, take on the burden of sustaining high culture?

Today, many detractors of public funding for the arts think and argue along these lines. To compound the problem of this politically conservative “lean and mean” attitude towards public spending, there is a growing resentment of any kind of protectionism among supporters of a borderless global economy. Defenders of international free trade view cultural subsidies by governments as protectionist measures counter to the spirit of existing free trade agreements.

The Canadian government, for example, is under constant pressure from its NAFTA associates to make culture an aspect of the North American Free Trade Agreement. The heavily subsidized cultural sector in Canada considers such a possibility suicidal for Canadian culture because, in a free-trade context, the Canadian cultural industry would not be able to compete with an industry 10 times its size located south of the border.

Pressure from the outside is not peculiar to Canada. In many countries, the view of government as a protector of national culture, agriculture, or industry is under assault from the outside and, in many cases, from the inside, too. Under such circumstances, it becomes increasingly difficult to balance the economic benefits of free trade with the less visible benefits of cultural identity. There is an ongoing debate within all levels of government, and the public at large, about the social importance of culture and the government's role in its preservation. The winners emerging from this debate are very rarely the artists. This ongoing climate of uncertainty, caused by a corresponding lack of vision and commitment to long-term support for the arts, has given rise to cynicism on both sides of the debate.

***“... the more a symphony orchestra resembles a corporation in its structure and operation, the more attractive it becomes to potential sponsors from the business community.”***

Increasingly, the corporate model, which the world of finance uses as a measuring device for everything else, finds converts within an arts community strapped for cash and willing to accept money with strings attached. The image of the successful corporation as a finely tuned orchestra is by now a cliché, but it still adorns sponsorship pages of concert programs and other printed publicity. Conversely, the more a symphony orchestra resembles a corporation in its structure and operation, the more attractive it becomes to potential sponsors from the business community. This in itself is a small price to pay for securing one's funding base. But it does not stop here. The constantly aging subscription base requires an increase in light, inoffensive content; the preference of corporate sponsors to underwrite concerts with well-known soloists and conductors forces the increase of star content in programming, even if that means

reallocating resources in a way that the remuneration gap between higher and lower artistic fees widens (as does the cynicism of orchestra members towards the whole idea of music making). The pressure from government funding bodies, which often make funding conditional upon commissioning and performing new works, results more often than not in apologetic productions of these works with limited chance of interesting a wider audience. Artistic directors play all these demands against each other and, at the other end of this juggling feat, out comes yet another concert season. Our concert music, in its desperate will to survive at all costs, has gone the way of the publicist, the lobbyist, the sleek image, and the MTV face, dress, and body language.

## Tracing an Ongoing Problem

Art and music have, of course, always been in similar predicaments. Artists had to strike balances between the requirements imposed by their patrons, impresarios, and underwriters and their own needs to say what they wanted to

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say. With a few exceptions, the cost of mounting ambitious works of art has always been beyond the means of individual ticket-buying attendants alone to underwrite. As the patronage of high art was passed from the hands of the church to the secular courts, to the bourgeoisie, to the present-day corporate and government sponsors, the requirements changed. But the character of art patronage since the Renaissance has remained essentially the same. It is a form of decorum, a measure of affluence, influence, and worldly position. To a Renaissance prince, a new Mass was similar to what a state-of-the-art industrial video or multimedia presentation is to a multinational corporation today. It was an indication of status, a subtle means by which the commissioner could assert independence from other sources of secular, religious, or economic power. It was an advertisement of a

patron’s “edge” over the competition. Art and music particularly flourished at times of pronounced rivalry between competing centers of secular power and influence. Secondly, it was a confirmation of the social system itself. By being the guardian of culture, the apex of the social pyramid legitimized its own position. Art validated the notion that a pyramidal social structure was the best means of maintaining a high level of civilization.

By the 19th century, when Romanticism was in full swing, one could argue that in Europe artists had finally managed to liberate themselves from social pressures, negate this pyramidal establishment, and set themselves independent of the patronage system of previous centuries. While on the surface this appears to have been the case, the image of the liberated artist became, in essence, a metaphor for the emerging urban, industrialist, and mercantile middle and upper classes. These new concentrations of economic power, resented by the old and declining aristocracy, sought to find social legitimacy through art, as had similar power structures before them. For this emerging new order, the story of Prometheus became the story of class struggle. Accordingly, Prometheus was established as morally higher than Zeus, the former representing the individual who takes his fortune into his own hands and suffers heroically for it, the latter symbolizing the inherited—or usurped—apex of an unpopular social pyramid, a resented arbiter of an arcane and irrational moral code.

In spite of appearances, romantic figures in art were very much a product, not a negation, of society. Beethoven, Wagner, Liszt, Nietzsche, and Darwin were the evangelists of the capitalist ethic and, conversely, the advent of capitalism

and its moral philosophy made their ideas possible and credible. As a new hierarchy of economic achievement was taking over from the older structure of social castes, that hierarchy raised the concept of individualism to a supreme ideological value. Individualism gave rights to talented or driven individuals who had no such rights under the system of inherited aristocracy. They in turn justified their upward mobility as an individual right, and in return gave the concept of individualism the status that only a class in power can provide.

The artist became a metaphor for the individual and his or her rights. By the nineteenth century, the gradual secularization of the role of the artist had acquired an added dimension. There was an increasing amount of psychological transference taking place between the audience and the stage. The performer and the composer increasingly embodied the urges, aspirations, and dreams of the new citizen. Goal orientation, the trademark of Western music since the Renaissance, became the operating principle of any successful musical work of the 18th and 19th centuries, and of performances of such works. From the relative lack of dynamic profile of early music through the terraced dynamics of the baroque, we reach a point at the height of the Romantic era when dramatic tempo and dynamic (amplitude) transformations, and gestures of every kind, become the lingua franca of musical communication. The orchestra increased in size and volume to celebrate the ideals of the industrial revolution. New, louder instruments were invented and older ones were outfitted with new appendages to cater to ears which were becoming accustomed to the powerful intensity of industrial machinery.

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I could find endless parallels between musical and social change in Western post-Renaissance society. It is not the parallels themselves, but the idea that music exists as a parallel to life, that necessitated a separation between the two. Music was life “acted out”; the two developed in tandem, but could not coincide or overlap as in premythic societies. They had to be kept separate for the psychological process of transference to take place. The artist was an object of identification for a repressed individual who was otherwise at a loss in understanding his or her position within society, not unlike the situation with pop music idols today. The stage took the place held by the altar in pre-Renaissance Europe and art became a substitute for religion. If theocracy was a hierarchical system in the “image and likeness” of pre-Renaissance society, then the Promethean individual who rises above the crushing weight of the opposing forces was in the “image and likeness” of the capitalist ethic. The soloist struggling against the orchestra in the concerto and the composer defying the expectations of the audience were images the romantic spirit cherished.

Even though a great deal of 20th-century music-related rhetoric was anti-romantic in nature, the actual musical attitudes with regards to performance did not change significantly. As modernism became aware of the impossibility behind the promise of capitalism, it took upon itself the unenviable task of exposing the lie behind the promise. The modernist message was of limited appeal, because—due to the lack of viable alternatives and the fact that in practice the industrial revolution was still promising a great future full of consumer commodities and scientific breakthroughs—society as a whole went into negation. Society chose to continue with the process of transference fine-tuned during the previous century, instead of facing up to the grim reality which modernism was exposing. So instrumental virtuosos, opera singers, and Promethean conductors continued to dominate the world's stages. If composers were disenchanted and unwilling to play along with this industrial myth, society was willing to dispense with them altogether or relegate them to relative obscurity. There was enough music from the common-practice era to perform over and over again. The focus shifted to interpretation. The concept of interpretation, a predominantly 20th-century phenomenon, gave a new lease on life to the finite classical repertoire. As an idea it did not originate in the 20th century, but it was for the first time in this century—with the invention of the phonograph record and the magnetic tape recorder—that we could make a permanent record of the way performers interpreted the works of the past. For several decades, the stage and the record industry focused their energies on interpretation rather than composition. They helped to establish the former as an art form of the highest cultural significance, while paying lip service to the latter. This was a faint echo of the veneration previous centuries held for the act of original creation.

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## **A New Paradigm**

In recent years, there has been a marked change in public attitudes towards classical repertoire. The mainstream classical record industry has reported alarming annual sales losses for several consecutive years. Analysts attribute this to the fact that record collectors have finished replacing their vinyl collections with compact discs and have, therefore, stopped buying. This analysis is further supported by the fact that certain smaller labels specializing in music by living composers—ECM New Series, Nonesuch—seem to be unaffected by this recession and are actually reporting annual growth in almost inverse ratio to declining sales of classical repertoire. No matter how one interprets the numbers, they clearly indicate a shifting interest from classical to new music among buyers.

Having said that, I should qualify the term “new music” in relation to these statistics. It does not include mid-century experiments usually known as the avant-garde, or similarly inspired works of the present. It mostly includes works composed from the 1960s onwards; those which adhere to a new musical paradigm.

I have written elsewhere about this new paradigm<sup>1</sup> and its music, so I will outline it only briefly for the purposes of this essay. Western music, from the advent of polyphony to about the middle of this century, has followed a more or less continuous trajectory of evolution, technically described as a process towards emancipation of the melodic, harmonic, rhythmic, and structural aspects of composition. The underlying social forces causing this development in composition can be broadly described as a psychological process of individuation. Polyphony and the concept of pluralism in music signaled the end of the Middle Ages and the era of one authority, one truth, and one voice common to everyone.

With polyphony, the Renaissance paradigm was born, even though the actual musical era that we describe as “Renaissance” did not come until later. This Renaissance paradigm extended to the late 19th century, when the process of individuation reached its peak, and almost immediately afterwards followed a path of sharp decline, reaching a musical and psychological state of maximal entropy—total randomness—by the 1950s and early 1960s. One can trace the origins of a new paradigm, the New Age paradigm, to about the same time. The proliferation of non-Western ideas, minimalism, and certain aspects of postmodernism are the early expressions of a growing disenchantment with the Renaissance paradigm and its postulates and the beginnings of a new way of looking at our society and its culture.

Let us examine a bit more closely this disenchantment. As I noted earlier, the music of every era is important, inasmuch as it addresses a certain deeply felt need and so long as it reverberates within a larger context, however one may choose to define it. We saw how the psychological process of individuation and its social and economic counterpart, capitalism, found continuing expression in the music of the Renaissance paradigm. A classical composition is a structure consisting of multiple layers of forward-moving harmonic progressions aiming toward a cadence. Even though there is a background structure, such as the I-V-I background progression in Shenkerian analysis, the great works of the 18th and 19th centuries were not composed “from the top down,” but in a way that the structure did not impede the forward motion of the foreground material. The opposition between themes, and the setting up and resolution of dissonance, were the prime tools of musical continuity. Society wanted structure, but it did not want an artificially maintained status quo. Structure had to be earned through struggle.

The mechanisms of this process had to consciously engage the listener long enough for the subliminal message—the compositional process as a metaphor for social and psychological ones—to take effect. The music had to engage the listener’s attention and expand the attention span by occasionally confirming,

but mostly betraying, listener expectation, producing musical information by means of a cat-and-mouse process. In an era when information was the privilege of the few, this was a great educational and mind-building tool.

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In the postindustrial information societies of the present, this process has a different effect. Today we are bombarded with information. Information overload is similar to the environmental contamination the industrial revolution caused. There is a great deal of competition among information providers for our attention—on the radio, television, telephone and fax, on the Internet, on the billboards and subway posters we see on our way to work and back. The advertisers’ strategies and methodologies for getting our attention are essentially no different from the strategies and methodologies Mozart, Beethoven, and Brahms used to the same end. There is a hook or a theme to engage us initially, and then some form of suspended resolution, which guarantees that we will stay tuned to the end of the message.

To defend ourselves against this barrage of information, we have developed a complex set of filters, which enables us to block unwanted information and let in only what we want to hear and see. To varying degrees, most postmodern urban dwellers are capable of deconstructing incoming information. This, however, happens at a psychological and, eventually, social cost. In such a state of siege, our antennas cannot stay tuned to the faint whispers of our souls, wherein lie the seeds

of a new and fundamental rethinking of ourselves, or to the subtle signals emanating from others which might become catalysts to this rethinking process. While advertisers and marketing experts develop ever more potent arrows, and we respond with heavier information shields, what is lost is the discovery which comes with traveling light. We are increasingly weighted down by information and feel oppressed by it.

In the same way we deconstruct a television advertisement, we also tend to deconstruct a Mozart symphony. If Mozart has become more popular in recent years than some of his contemporaries, it is probably because he “pushes” information less relentlessly. One can enjoy his music as a pure sonic experience, more so perhaps than Beethoven’s music, which by comparison sounds like a rigorous sonic implementation of structure. This new, less cerebral way of listening to music is reflected in a new kind of classical radio programming, the variety show. The programming principle is extreme geographical and chronological displacement: the more different two successive items are from each other, the better. This type of presentation is successful not because the

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listener is capable of constantly switching cognitive mechanisms to follow the radically different languages between successive items, but because he or she absorbs the music at the level of sound, rather than the level of structure, and is implicitly encouraged by this form of programming to engage in a manner of listening which is not hierarchical, but random.

Our perception of the music can be described as a series of instant “epiphanies,” sudden bursts of meaning which are not threaded in any discernible linear manner. The method of presentation ultimately becomes the content. In postmodern societies, we listen to the classics in a way which engages their information content considerably less than it has in the past, as background music for a dinner conversation, or while reading the newspaper, or when driving the car in heavy traffic. We want the music we listen to to relieve stress, not add to it by further exposure to information. Capitalism may be the only extant socioeconomic system today, but we don’t need Wagner to remind us

of it. What we need is a sanctuary for our cluttered senses.

### **The Need for Sanctuary**

In some respects we have come around full circle, or, as I see it, we are on the same perpendicular position on an upward-moving spiral. Just as the church and its metaphysical promise of salvation provided an answer to medieval society (with its political and economic uncertainties and the frequent invasions of Europe by hordes from the east), spirituality today becomes an open door for an individual who has been reduced by the information society to little more than a target.

Religion, which in its etymological sense means “to reconnect,” provides an answer to postmodernist deconstruction. Is this escape? It could very well become so, and the very industry which forces us to escape in the first place is readying itself to receive us at the other end. Compact discs of any music with spiritual aspirations or pretensions sell well, and the most visible evangelists of the New Age paradigm are now big business. But true spirituality is our last, our only surviving citadel: it is the still center within us, a sanctuary no one can enter uninvited. It is our “gyro,” which, as in fighter airplanes, will orient us no matter how fast the world turns around us and we in it. If the music of the new paradigm composers can help us attain that realm which will empower us as individuals, the price of a compact disc or a concert ticket is a small price to pay, indeed.

The viable music of today is catalytic. It responds to real needs by real and direct means. The glorification of the individual as a struggling demigod associated with the old paradigm is no longer a viable psychological and/or

sociopolitical necessity. I believe, therefore, that its musical analogue, virtuosic performance, on stage or electronically captured, will have little functionality in tomorrow's culture. Conversely, the concept of musical ritual in its pure sense, where there is no division between priesthood and laity, performers and audience, but rather a communion of participants with the music functioning as a catalyst for that communion, will be most likely the music of tomorrow's society. It will be an egoless music whose center of gravity will lie outside the composer: it will lie in fact outside the composition altogether.

***“Musical metaphors of the industrial era, such as the large symphony orchestra and the conductor/soloist cult, are likely to decline while such participatory structures as community choirs are likely to transform and grow.”***

If the need for sanctuary today is fast becoming universal, a critical mass of people should acquire a taste for music which addresses this need at some point in the future. If and when this becomes the case, the question of whether or not governments should support the arts will become rhetorical. Chances are that the system of parliamentary democracy may not fare any better tomorrow than arts funding, health care, and welfare do today. If we relinquish the idea of our government being all things to all people, we in fact relinquish the moral *raison d'être* for government altogether.

If I were to predict the future of concert music based on the trends discussed here, I would say that we will most likely witness simultaneous growth and decline within the arts sector at either end of the new/old paradigm polarity. Musical metaphors of the industrial era, such as the large symphony orchestra and the conductor/soloist cult, are likely to decline while such participatory structures as community choirs are likely

to transform and grow. Composition will change, too, in both content and process. It will become more interactive; not in a mechanistic way, imitating the structure of video games, but in a manner whereby the composer creates spaces within which the listener-participant meditates. It will be a spiritual canvas, the imprint on which will be that of the end user more than the creator.

I started this paper in a rather pessimistic manner because there is growing pessimism and cynicism in the field of music on both sides of the funding debate, and in labor relations within larger arts organizations, caused no doubt by the perception that the future of classical music appears bleak for both practitioners and music lovers. As musicians, we have been made to feel that we are immaterial, unnecessary, and real nuisances by the powers that be and the public at large for the better part of this century. At the doorstep of the new millennium this no longer is the case. If we stare bravely into the future, if we penetrate the seemingly impenetrable clouds of our present predicament, we will see great need for music, and an opportunity for the artist to become an embodiment, not just a metaphor, of human aspiration. Dare we accept this challenge? Dare we sacrifice

our artists' egos on the altar of humanity? The plethora of choices we have been accustomed to having in the past is fast collapsing into two distinct ones: the first leads up a narrow path to spirituality; the other choice is, increasingly, MTV.

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### **Note**

- <sup>1</sup> Hatzis, Christos. 1996. Footprints in New Snow: Towards a New Musical Paradigm. Posted on the World Wide Web at < [www.chass.utoronto.ca:8080/~ chatzis/paradigm.htm](http://www.chass.utoronto.ca:8080/~chatzis/paradigm.htm) > . Published by MikroPolyphonie on-line journal, Latrobe University, Australia.