

UCLA
CSW Update Newsletter

Title

Writing (about) Music

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1mr9w7sx>

Author

Norderval, Kristin

Publication Date

2010-04-01

WRITING (ABOUT) MUSIC

BY KRISTIN NORDERVAL

WHEN I'M LISTENING TO BACH—one of my favorite composers—how do I describe it? I have often told friends that the opening of “Wachet Auf, ruft uns die Stimme” always makes me smile and quickens my step. The dotted rhythms, the upward sweep of the alternating scalar passages of strings and oboes, the rising triads and long tones at the entry of the choir soaring over the repetitive rhythmic motion of the orchestra, the ornate melodic turns and quirky

harmonic shifts all work together to shift my mood and my body rhythms.

These are descriptions of instrumentation, and of melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic details that I respond to, but this doesn't necessarily convey to a lay reader what I'm trying to get across. It certainly doesn't convey what the piece actually sounds like, and it relies on knowledge of music terminology, if not a previous knowledge of Bach, to make sense of it.

The words convey so much less of the music and my experience of listening to it, than a simple visual observation of the change in my physicality while listening to it would convey. I think about this when I watch people on the subway listening to music through earphones. I get more of a sense of the music they are listening to by their body responses than references to genre, instrumentation or rhythmic and melodic details would give me.

As musicians however, we need to use language to speak and write about what we do. Composers especially have to use language (written or spoken), musical notation and/or graphics to convey information to other musicians about how to perform our music. So how do we who are writers of music, write or speak about our own music? One would think we might be accustomed to it and easily able to convey with language a sense of its essence. And yet, trying to describe our own music is surprisingly difficult. We are dependent on the reader's previous listening experience and knowledge of references and context.

I was reminded of this recently while in the process of writing an article on the influence of Cathy Berberian on American singer-composers. I had had conversations with four fellow singer-composers in New York (Pamela Z, Joan

La Barbara, Theo Bleckman and Susan Botti). I was struck by the ways that my colleagues answered the question "How would you describe your music to someone who doesn't know it?" They described their work, sometimes hesitantly, sometimes fluently, but always using references to something else either in the field of music or in other arts. It became clear that what a listener or reader would understand, would depend on what that someone did know. Whether they knew the vocabulary of the field, or didn't know the field at all, would make a great deal of difference.

Pamela Z described her work as that of a particular subset of composers that she identified as "composer-performers who work with voice and electronics, using real-time processing"—a subset defined by the instrumentation or tools used, even though the aesthetic

characteristics of that group might be very divergent. Theo Bleckman and Joan La Barbara referred to musical genres to describe their work: "based in jazz, non-classical" and "contemporary classical composer, abstract." La Barbara, Susan Botti, and Pamela Z referred to their musical roots. Pamela Z referenced her beginnings as a singer-songwriter; Susan Botti spoke about her background in free jazz and theater improvisation; and Joan La Barbara referred to her beginnings as an avant-garde singer of works by other composers. These genre references create a context of inferred elements for those who know the field, (instrumentation, harmonic language, vocal style, technique, and timbre), but they don't describe the music.

Delving more deeply into the characteristics of their work, each of these composers continued with a

language of intention and attraction:
they described what they love—or love
to do.:

I love found text. Just as I like making sound with found objects, I like picking up text that came from somewhere—instructions, ingredients... I love repetition... looping has had a major role in my work.

I'm always looking for connection. Accessibility is important to me. I try to see where I can find holes in my bubble....I like to find ways of making music that is not so insular.

I like textures. I like creating layers of sound... an orchestra of voices. I will often create a sonic atmosphere that is a foundation over which live musicians perform.

Theater informs my music in both form and presentation. I like to write for particular events and particular performers—for a violinist, not a violin.

The adjectives used to describe their own voices brought in additional aural references: “ethereal,” “Sarah Vaughan register,” “bel canto to extended vocal techniques,” and “voice as an instrument... sometimes a percussion instrument, sometimes a string instrument, sometimes a reed.” References to other composers were used either as a comparison (similar to) or as a contrast (not like so and so), and references to artists from other fields highlighted interest in other aspects of the creative process, from conceptual art and self exploration (Vito Acconci and Bruce Nauman) to theatrical vision (Robert Wilson, Pina Bausch).

Again, these are reference points that give fields of association, but they still don't describe what the essence of the music is. Is it perhaps better to ask what the music does to a listener? All four composers talked about the effects

they wished to have on their audience: “connected,” “reflective of human emotion,” and “communicating on a pre-verbal level.”

The language we have to describe music is woefully inadequate. It doesn't capture the richness or the individuality of a particular work or composer's style. It doesn't capture the essence of what it is that draws a listener in or what causes the pulse to quicken. Perhaps Susan Botti's initial response to my question of how to describe her music was the wisest: “I wouldn't answer that question! I would say listen to the music.”