

Few Call for New Tunes, by Benjamin Wolf

Published in the Financial Times, Weekend Section, 27th September 2003

Everyone knows that the restaurants of Hollywood are staffed by would-be actors. Yet fewer people realise that the box offices of England's concert halls are staffed by singers and the pubs of London by orchestral musicians. Music is a profession whose rewards are significant, but they are not counted in sterling.

As both a conductor and composer, this is something to which I can testify. Both activities are stimulating, but neither makes me more than a minimal living. The rest of my time (the bit which keeps me alive) is spent in arts administration. It is a life spent flitting between office time and rehearsal time, between jobs that pay the bills and work that doesn't. While my friends who are lawyers, journalists or accountants think that being a musician sounds fascinatingly different, musicians are less encouraging. Don't give up the music, they say, but are you sure you want to make a living from it?

It is easy to forget that the big challenge facing young composers is to write good, thoughtful music. In the words of composer George Benjamin, this means "to have good technique, find your own voice, to have the right teachers and to hear your works played at a decent level; to have wide experience of hearing up-to-date music from around the world and to be nourished by the music of your time."

He is right, and the challenge is immense. But there is also the need to find commissions, audiences and livelihood. How do we get performed? How do we build careers? Will we ever be paid? Whereas once composers such as Bach or Mozart could rely on private patronage, and could apply for professional positions that demanded the regular production of new works, the modern world is short on patronage and almost devoid of secure jobs.

So what do I do? Promote and perform my own music and apply for funding where possible – funds from the Jewish Music Institute and Millennium Commission will allow me to put on a performance of a piano concerto in November (though the money covers only performance costs, not my living expenses). I also have friends who like my music enough to commission it – I have written music for a play commissioned for a friend. The

experience was invaluable, and the play – *Canaries Sometimes Sing* – had an extended run. But there was no money to pay the director or the actors, let alone the composer.

Many composers find it difficult even to be performed. My own orchestra (the Wallace Ensemble) recently promoted a composition prize. Sponsorship from Pearson allowed us to pay the players – music students and young professionals – and to give £500 to the winner, David Lloyd-Mostyn. This was good for him, but for a piece lasting almost 20 minutes we “paid” him a salary of about £30 a day.

The market for composition is not strong – among concerts performed by British orchestras in the past few months only about a quarter contain a piece by a living composer. Just one in 20 contains only works by living composers, and these are either concerts of film music, or performed by orchestras dedicated to contemporary composition.

Some of our finest orchestras are now “period” bands, which perform only works written before about 1900. These outnumber contemporary ensembles by nearly two to one. They perform in a world in which the great figures are performers, not composers. Where once the lions of music were Beethoven or Wagner, they are now “interpreters” such as Rattle or Brendel. Where once people gathered in eager anticipation of new works, they are now sceptical. Audiences appear frightened of new works, and orchestras lack the confidence to programme them.

Even so, I continue to compose and try to find avenues for my composition that do not rely on professional commissions. I, like many others, have posted my work on Sibeliusmusic.com (a website open to any composer) where my score shares its position with 22,000 others (even though, in the past few months, the big UK orchestras have performed works by just 74 living composers). Occasionally, someone downloads the score.

I have also sought assistance from groups such as the Society for the Promotion of New Music. Other organisations can also be useful – the BBC is a valuable source of commissions, many of them performed at the BBC Proms.

Composers, myself included, rely too on also being performers, and can at least play our own works. Others write for theatre, television or film, in which the money available is greater, but so too are the compromises.

Perhaps the most curious thing is that so many people still want to be composers. In any given year a music college may have 20 to 30 composition students, implying a total (in the UK) of nearly 200. Add university students, graduates from music faculties and amateur composers is the result is an impressive number. They, and I, live in a world in which musical organisations balance the demands of governments, sponsors, audiences, players, conductors and soloists. These demands rarely include the demand for new music, and modern composers must fight more than ever before to be heard. It is often a frustrating fight, but sometimes it is rewarding, entertaining and utterly fulfilling. In those moments, it is worth it.