Letters

Responses to the Editorial in *Computer Music Journal* 15:3

Before I reply to the editorial, I would like to clear up some confusion. You state that you are going to address "the marginalization of 'art music' within contemporary art." However, the first examples you talk about concern juries within the discipline itself; they have no role in the larger world of contemporary art (I guess this could be debated). This is a different issue from how electroacoustic music is treated in the larger context of contemporary art. I would have two replies to your editorial, one addressing the expectations of juries within the field and the second addressing the quality of music in the interdisciplinary arts.

Regarding juries, as I continue to explore my "voice" in music I am less and less interested in participating in competitions. They tend to imply that there is a "way" to write music. It has taken me a few years to distinguish between the music I think others want me to write and what I want to write. Frequently, I can tell (feel?) when music presented by others is written not from internal motivations, but from external motivations and I usually don't care for those pieces (my own personal bias).

On the one hand you have a group of people on a jury who are biased to what they think music should be (not to mention the politics involved); on the other side are the composers who either write to the (perceived) juries tastes or write to their own tastes. The people who win often are those whose aesthetic (this is what they want to write) matches that of the jury. The rest are left out in the cold.

The other view one can take with juries is that there is "good" music and "bad" music. Juries decide what the "good" music is. Although I have used these terms in the past, I am less inclined to use them in the future. Why? I think it is rather presumptuous for any of us to decide from our limited perceptions of the world what is "good" or "bad." I also think it's an easy way for any of us to rationalize that we are (or our music is) more important or better than someone else(s). If by bad, we mean music that doesn't appeal to our aesthetic, then we should state it that way. Or, knowing what a composer is trying to convey in a piece (based on program notes or style or conversations with the composer), we can say that the ideas could be presented in a clearer fashion. Does this mean the piece is bad?

Let me explain what I mean by presumptuous. Western culture has been very good at developing the mind. In the process we have also lost track of discounted other kinds of knowledge (two simple examples would be the "sixth sense" and "gut feeling"). If we can't explain something, we tend to either force it into some existing perceptual box or discount it entirely. But we always try to process it through the mind. I think this limits our experience of the world. I am not interested in some predefined aesthetic that a "majority of experts in the field" have determined is the correct way to write music. There is more to music (and the world) than "head-processed" knowledge.

An example from my experience is that the music I am doing now is improvisational. I have heard comments such as "it sounded written." Does that make it more palatable? Or would it have been better if it had been written? Why does writing something down make it legitimate? Is it because it has been processed through someone's head before it's presented as music? Many of these juries want to see a score or sketch or something that shows the ideas have been "correctly processed." That's not my direction right now and I am not going to try to make it fit some juries' expectations of what they think music is. I don't expect competitions to change and that's okay. There are other avenues to getting one's music out into the world.

Regarding the status of music in the interdisciplinary arts, you ask the following question at the end: "What is the cause for these apparent inequities, and what can computer musicians do about it?

I don't really know what the cause is. My guess is that the music is usually an afterthought. But it doesn't really matter what the cause is.

My reply is, if you want to change things, get to know the people in the field and work with them. I'll bet many of them would be willing to work with electroacoustic composers. The point is, to make an impact on the current state of "things," get involved.

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(Polansky)

I thought I'd add a note that, while probably tangential to the main point of the editorial, may be of interest in representing a certain community of composers dealing with experimental technologies.

Your concern seems to stem mainly from the results of two competitions, in which the juries lamented the lack of quality of the submissions. I feel it should be pointed out that there is a large community of interesting and experimental composers who never apply to competitions at all, for a variety of reasons. Some are simply opposed to the idea; some have difficulty "getting it together" organizationally to do so; some simply don't focus well on the act of promoting

their music as opposed to producing it. I know many composers who are simply against having their music judged by a jury. This is a highly personal decision, and one that I do not completely share, but one with which I am quite sympathetic. (I occasionally, but not very often, send out scores and tapes in this fashion. I'm not a big fan of the process but it doesn't bother me either; I view it as more or less a necessary evil in our art world.)

It seems to me, in fact, a kind of statistical artifact of competitions, calls for scores, and the like, that they will tend to be deluged with works by people who are very good at the process of submitting them, which may or may not be related to the interest of the work itself. I say "may or may not" very carefully—there is no reason to believe that composers who scorn these kinds of activities are any more interesting than those who do not. But in general, composers working in an academic environment, or those trained in one, have more experience in this kind of thing than those who have taken more independent or radical personal paths, and as a result, certain types of music and music making tend to predominate in competitions. In addition, there has been a prevalent bias, perhaps inherent in these mechanisms themselves, against live electronic music. There are many important and ground-breaking composers, including people such as John Bischoff, George Lewis, Jim Horton, Brenda Hutchinson, Laetitia de Sonami, Joel Ryan, Ron Kuivila and so many others, who have worked in live computer music for many years, and who have not usually been the recipients of prizes, awards, composer fellowships and so on. Juries will tend to perpetuate stylistic biases; they will generally choose works whose qualities they recognize as having something in common with

their own work, and they will select future juries on the same bases. I have served on enough of them to see this happen many times. It takes vision and innovation to break the chain. (I think the work that Otto Laske and others have done at NEW-COMP is a good example of this vision, as are the directions that John Rahn has taken *Perspectives of New Music*.)

What I suggest is a subtle and gradual change in our notion of responsibility, something I have been saying in many ways and many forms for years. If interesting people don't send in something to our competition, journal, recording project, arts collective, etc., it's in part our responsibility, not entirely theirs. Organizations and institutions that promote, produce, and distribute experimental and innovative music must take a proactive and aggressive role, rather than a passive one—go out and dig the interesting stuff up! I know how hard it is, since I've long been personally involved in this kind of thing in a variety of roles (as editor of *Leonardo*, as the director of Frog Peak Music, and as a staff member of the Mills Center for Contemporary Music, as well as, incidentally, a frequent National Endowment for the Arts panelist). For all of us to sit back and lament the quality of material that rolls in when we put out a "call for tapes" is not sufficient; there's plenty of extraordinary work out there, but it may be that one's mechanism for finding it needs revision.

I know this position will raise some opposition. Many will say that if a composer can't "get it together" to submit a tape why should a jury or journal or company be concerned with him or her. My simple and heartfelt answer to this is that we should not lose sight of the important goals— the more interesting music the better. Music is not an academic competition. Nor is it a struggle for survival

of the fittest and most business oriented. It is, for many of us composers, a way of life, and juries, judges, and prizes are secondary artifacts, at times necessary ones. For many composers, the notion of a competition or a "music jury" can be either reprehensible, unfathomable, or even just irrelevant. These artists can rightly be accused of losing touch with the reality of their times, but isn't that what composers are supposed to do? Let's not lose those artists—let's just find ways to include their works.

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I have entered the electroacoustic music field only recently, after receiving very inspirational instruction from Vladimir Ussachevsky and Tracy Petersen, here at the University of Utah. The viewpoint expressed below reflects the thoughts more of an observer of the genre than of a participant, but I feel it is a valid point, one we seem to forget, now more than ever.

I've noticed a trend in contemporary electroacoustic music that I believe contributes, in part, to the marginalization of music within the media arts. A separation between music and the technology that creates music is widening, threatening the art of music. In the past few years, I've been very disappointed in the prize winners of the Bourges competitions. Prizes in this competition have been awarded, it seems, on the basis of technological advance or new synthesis technique, rather than on the basis of musicality. While it is important to foster research, it is equally important to create from these new technologies appropriate tools for composers. Access to these tools currently is limited to the scien-