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The Place of New Music

Instead of thinking about new music as a list of works, composers and performers, couldn't we describe it as a series of places? What would happen if we referred to pieces by the situations in which we first heard them rather than by their titles and creators? In the end, music is just the coming together of sound reverberating in space with an individual listener, an utterly one-time experience consisting of coordinates of time, place and the movement of air molecules. I suspect most composers wouldn't like to think of their works in those terms, but I'm quite happy to assemble my own personal geography of premieres – a filtering of the world by new music experiences. For instance, I could talk about the cycle for choir and instruments, a favourite to this very day, that I was introduced to one afternoon in 1999 via CD at a friend's New York apartment, or the strangely theatrical piece I witnessed in 2014 at a venue in a small city in central Germany. There was, on that latter occasion, an atmosphere generated by the intensity of the work and its performance the likes of which I had never experienced before (»you had to be there«, as they say). Once even, I heard a piece for small ensemble, dwarfed by an event space the size of a cattle market. I sat there straining to hear over the ambient sound of more than one thousand new music festival-goers, the music's odd and delicate beauty almost enhanced by the effort I was making to listen to it.

Of course, the more experimentally oriented among us already understand the importance of situation to the perception of music – that you can just throw the windows of a room open and that it will already constitute an experience, even if there is no title, no composer. For others, the places in which new music happens are a symptom of its relative cultural marginalisation (even if this position at the periphery is often a subsidized one). New Music takes place in airless underground spaces, former shops in busy streets, too-reverberant churches, boomy sports halls, noisy cafés. We wouldn't voluntarily select these places, and given the choice perhaps we would prefer fancy (if half-empty) concert halls in large cities. But don't these venues that we wouldn't necessarily choose, somehow shape us? Doesn't the acoustic unsuitability, the variability of situation, the difference we encounter between the locations where new music happens, keep us on our toes somehow? One could imagine that it might be quite an advantage, this compelled adaptability – something to toughen new music up for the decades of uncertainty that lie ahead.

