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A Model for a Hybrid World

Some thoughts on “teaching composition”

Can one teach composition?

One of the final questions I was asked during my job interview for the professorship in composition at the Hochschule für Musik “Carl Maria von Weber” Dresden, was delivered to me with a slightly mischievous smile: “is it even possible to teach composition”?

The question took me by surprise, but my answer was a resound “No”.

I don’t believe that it’s possible to teach composition, or for that matter any art form. One can teach techniques, styles, (a specific type of) craftsmanship, software, history and theory, one can train the ear, but teaching how to be(come) a composer is another matter entirely.

Then *what* and *how* can one “teach” composition students? What can an institution and its teachers offer them in today’s technologized, interconnected and increasingly hybrid world?

My answer today is not only informed by my own experiences as a student in different institutions and fields, in different countries and on different continents, but also by working with composition students as individual tutor, and professor, through masterclasses, and by navigating the professional life of a free-lance composer. Perhaps this answer is best summarized by four words: guidance, community, laboratory & collaboration.

Thinking Wildly

The best a “teacher” can do to help flourish the creative seed (if it is present) – and the goal I set for myself as a teacher – is not to cultivate in the student a specific way of thinking but rather a *freedom of thinking*, a freedom *in* thinking and *through* thinking, so that it becomes a *wild* thinking. *Thinking wildly* is an act of creativity, curiosity, interrogation, autonomy and healthy anarchy, it is a thinking that is flexible and always evolving, which stems from observing and questioning today’s world with all its artefacts, interactions, structures, tensions, cultures, environments, politics, technologies, ideas, traditions, histories, visions, realities,

disciplines and art. It is the kind of thinking that might create unexpected links between sound recordings of Australian forest fires, an electric guitar and a disabled dancer. Or that might develop into a work for geo-tracked audience and spatialized orchestra, or into a songcycle for voice and piano based on chatbot dialogues. It is a thinking that is one of the (many) necessary conditions to create art that is personal, contemporary, touching, surprising and enlightening. And it should come with an equally wild *critical* thinking and selfreflection.

By offering a critical yet supportive voice, contextualisation and perspective, the composition teacher should guide the students in their personal exploration, intellectually, aesthetically and emotionally. But that's not enough. The teacher should be a hybrid between a guide and a collaborator. The interaction between student and "teacher" has to be bidirectional. Not only are the student and teacher working together to try to uncover, understand and expand the student's artistic quest, but the teacher should have an openness and expectation to learn from the student too. Many times, for example, I have understood my own music better through my interactions with students.

Community

An institution, a school, a department, a class should be a safe space in which students are encouraged to take risks and are supported on all levels (direction, administration, tech support, teachers, ...) while they do so.

It should house a carefully curated and maintained community in which students inspire and challenge each other, collaborate with and learn from each other, even when their artistic paths lead to opposite directions.

Offering multiple perspectives on what "composition" can be, for example through the non-exclusive availability of teachers, as is the case in the Hochschule für Musik in Dresden, where students can choose two different composition teachers –out of three– each semester, with different aesthetic and conceptual approaches, helps creating such an inspiring and critical surroundings. It helps bringing the necessary oxygen for discussions and offers different models against which the students have to critically position themselves in search for their own models, beliefs, aesthetics and visions.

A critical mass of talented students is crucial to build such a community. As in every community and habitat this implies a sufficient number (also not too many) of community members, with different profiles, backgrounds and ideas. Ideally this

community is gender-balanced and contains a representative amount of members from minority groups. Through, for example, regular colloquiums in which the students present their own works, they can sharpen their thinking and hearing, and develop strategies to talk about their own works and constructively critique that of their colleagues.

Laboratory & collaboration

Equally important is to create a sufficient amount of “laboratory” situations in which the students have to collaborate to achieve a common goal, such as artistic or academic projects (i.e. a performance, an installation, a concert, a conference, a presentation). They can also be organised as mere “playgrounds” (i.e. an improvisation band) where students of different plumage can meet musically and dirty their hands collectively.

In such a community it should be self-evident that performers, composers and artists from different disciplines work together and pollinate eachothers creativity. After all, together with our contemporary life, today’s artistic creations are becoming more and more hybrid too. They make use of many media, many sources and perspectives, different interactions between physical and virtual identities and are presented on different platforms. They are breaking down barriers between different art forms and presentation models.

Whichever artistic position the composition student develops, it is essential that the connection with today’s society stands central. And this, I believe, cannot be achieved without contact to today’s technologies in the context of music creation.

Hybrid Music Lab, Sound&Fury

At the Hochschule für Musik “Carl Maria von Weber” Dresden we therefore bring the bachelor composition students in touch with (some of) today’s technologies through an obligatory course of four semesters, *Theorie der Elektronische Musik*. Furthermore, we have transformed the *Studio für Elektronische Musik*, which was founded in 1984, into the so-called *Hybrid Music Lab*. This is not just a superficial make-over, but it signals the above mentioned recalibration to today’s societal and artistic hybridity and an openness to include other media and disciplines in the students’s creative endeavours.

A new pillar in the *Hybrid Music Lab* will be *Sound&Fury*, a hybrid improvisation ensemble, which functions as a playground and creative meeting spot/melting pot for composers, performers and, on the long run ideally also artists from other disciplines. This biweekly praxis of creating (hybrid) music together through musical self-organisation, hopefully will further fuel discussion, dialogues and collaborations across disciplines and media and offer opportunities to passionately workshop ideas. As such it could serve as a necessary model in a world which can only tackle its existential threats, such as climate change, pandemics and mass extinction, through inter- and transdisciplinary collaboration and wildly thinking out-of-the-box.