

Larry Sitsky will be, if he is not already, one of the more influential composers who have worked in Australia this century. Although sequestered in the relative isolation of Canberra since 1966, he has always contributed greatly not only to the body of repertory produced in this country, but also to the discourse about music. He has entered with some glee into often controversial debate about his own music and the state of contemporary music and music-making in Australia, and has thought ahead to the future in the form of the collection which is being progressively acquired by the National Library of Australia.¹ Its thousands of pages of information indicate a musician who wants to be remembered, a musician with a strong sense of self-preservation and self-documentation, and also a strong sense of historicity. This sense of historicity is revealed in the pre-occupations of his working life.

Central to Sitsky's conception of music is the importance of the relationship between composition and performance. He is strongly committed to the idea of the composer-pianist, especially because of his own lineage through Winifred Burston and Egon Petri to Busoni, Anton Rubinstein and Liszt, and more recently his Russian musical heritage in general. This commitment manifests itself variously in Sitsky's eclectic style and influences, in his Romantic belief in the importance of passion and expressivity in music, in the rhapsodic nature of his most characteristic works, and in his insistence on the importance of sound over process, of emotion over intellectualism, of reality over abstraction. Sitsky definitely lives in this century of huge diversity, engaging fully with its debates and drawing widely from virtually all compositional techniques in currency, but maintains his own very personal aesthetic: composers must 'get their hands dirty' because, ultimately, music proves itself only in performance.

In keeping with Sitsky's general preference for communication via letter, rather than telephone or any more recent electronic device, the following interview was conducted by letter between 29 February and 26 May 1996, with four sets of three questions eliciting four sets of responses, in the order in which they are presented here.

If forced to describe your aesthetic and music in one phrase, I would use the term 'Romantic Modernist'. How would you respond to such a description? I hesitate to use the word label, although you may choose to respond to it as such.

Although I dislike labels, the description is pretty accurate I guess. It's not sufficiently broad though. I would have added perhaps 'orientalist' and 'mystic'. This latter is most evident in my music I think; when writing about the Russians from the 1920s in my last book² I was quite moved to discover that world outlooks of composers such as Scriabin, Obukhov, Vyshnedgradsky and others were close to mine and that I belonged in one sense to that lineage of mystical composers. The Romantic side of my music comes, as well, from the heritage of Anton Rubinstein, Busoni and the like—the painting with a broad brush. The modernist descent is from the expressionism of early Schoenberg and Berg, plus an adaptation of some of their techniques. Finally, the word 'dramatic' needs adding, resulting in the final phrase being 'romantic dramatic orientalist-mystic expressionist modernist'. Not bad!

What place is there for 'tonality' (define this term as you like) in music written a century after Strauss, Schoenberg, Mahler, Scriabin etc.? Does tonality justify its existence in contemporary 'art music' (again, define this term as you like)?

Functional tonality as taught in the text-books did die quite early in the 20th century. But despite the efforts of the 12 tone and serialist schools, composers continue to recognize that some kind of tonality not only continues to exist, but moreover can be usefully added to the armoury of technique. If this is what Shostakovich meant when he said that 'there are still plenty of pieces to be written in C Major', then I tend to agree. Pop music and most jazz music can't exist without a well-defined tonality, still following many of the old precepts in a way ranging from primitive to sophisticated. Art Music, which perhaps can be defined as Not-Popular-Music, uses tonality in many ways, not the least of which is contrast, that is, the inclusion of a triad in a predominantly non-tonal context, which can be

an aural shock. Recent post-modernism (and prior to that, minimalism) uses tonality in a more basic way, but I don't like the way—it might be fairly happy, optimistic music, but I also find much of it boringly repetitive, soft-edged and self-consciously pretty. But it's healthy that we needn't agonize anymore if we wish to write a major or minor triad.

Does contemporary music fulfil the promise of its own tradition? I leave you to decide what this question might mean.

Some of the 'promises' made in that tradition have not been fulfilled. I am now thinking of the total serialists as well as the electro-acoustic music scene. But dead ends need to be explored before we are certain that they are dead ends. I am by this not necessarily implying that all electro-acoustic music is a dead end. What I am trying to say is that the promised freedom has not yet eventuated. Perhaps real-time computer music will finally deliver the goods, but we are at the stone age stage of this development, much of it uncontrolled childish 'doodling'. Contemporary music had other unfulfilled promises (e.g. neoclassicism), but all recent exploration has been fun at least and necessary at most.

Somewhere it needs to be said that composers have choice all their lives. One doesn't have to dogmatise about how other people should write. And the avant garde marginalises itself sometimes deliberately, a sort of 'professional avant garde'. There has always been popular music and music for connoisseurs—and that's not a bad thing. In the end, it depends how much 'homework' the audiences want to do before listening to new(ish) music.

To follow on from your definition of Art Music as Not-Popular-Music, or as music for connoisseurs: do you think it is also true that Art Music is not popular, that being popular and being for connoisseurs are mutually exclusive conditions? For example, some minimalist/process/repetitive music (especially that which is not happy, optimistic, soft-edged and/or self-consciously pretty) might be seen to inhabit both worlds.

We are now in the tangled morass of definitions of High Art! I won't be able to solve this problem any better than others, but perhaps WILL be able to clarify my personal attitude. I have a kind of elite attitude to music with a capital M (not a politically correct sentiment these days, I know!). I see some music as an aristocratic art; one that requires initiation and work to become a member. I feel that we have cheapened the product to a great extent by its ready availability via disc, videos, musak, a glut of concerts etc. etc. In my ideal world it would be difficult to get to a concert, to hear a piece, to hear a great performer.... There is no doubt that some music exists in both the popular arena and in the high art world: but whether these works are heard in the same way in both camps is yet another question.

Art has many layers of meaning. The most obvious, the surface layer, is readily understood; but then, if the work is to survive, it must have other layers beneath, so that each generation and every new hearing peels off another layer and reveals another meaning below. Works that inhabit both popular and high art worlds possess such layers. Indeed, certain popular music, by composers such as Cole Porter, Gershwin and so on, possesses it as much as sonatas by Beethoven.

The problem is that honest composers cannot deliberately set out to belong to a particular camp or style simply because it is desirable or trendy or politically correct. There is a question of being true to one's own self, a kind of self-monitored integrity. After all, you have to live with your own products—and being in my 60s I understand that only too well every time I hear an early work! It's not a question of writing for posterity—I think that composers write for NOW—but simply being able to live with what one writes; being able to say—'well, I don't write like that now, but that was me, back then'.

I don't feel in the least bit snooty about popular art and therefore see no reason why it and high art cannot share any common ground: the definitions, such as they may be, are NOT mutually exclusive.

Why has the 'professional avant-garde' sometimes deliberately isolated itself? And is it isolation only from the audience, or from other musicians and other artists as well?

Once again, there are definitions at stake here. I am currently editing a book about the avant-garde of the 20th century and have had to think about how I understand the word. By 'professional' avant-garde I meant the type of composer to whom innovation is more important than content or integrity. It's a seductive thing and many composers succumb to it at various points in their development, most usually when they start out. But innovation without vision is not only shallow but often self-defeating since the actual sound, the thing this is all about, is often the victim of the innovation.

What I finally found unacceptable was a situation where the process was becoming more important than the sounds; the sound was relegated to a by-product of the process. And since music is, in the end, about communication (otherwise, why bother to be a composer?) I was troubled about that kind of avant-garde that eventually was composing for a smaller and smaller circle of other composers, NOT to communicate a personal vision, but to proclaim some kind of innovation in a purely technical area.

I suppose the process has been very visible in this century especially, from fairly early on. Eventually, the marginalization became so extreme that composers themselves found it too frustrating and unsatisfactory and began to move away from it. Hence all the neo-romantic and post-modernist movements, not to even speak of the minimalist aspects.

But art that does not alter is dead, frozen in time. It is a very necessary part of art to constantly be in a state of flux. Our problem in the 20th century (we are at the end of it and can now view it with some sense of historical perspective) has been that too often we fell in love with maths, technology, systems—the cerebral aspect of music-making—at the cost of humanity and—dare one say it?—emotion.

The marginalization of the avant-garde is akin to a petulant child who can't get its way and retreats, sulking, into a corner. It must be understood, however, that I am not measuring the 'success' of a work of art by the size of its audience. Far from it! I have absolutely no problem with a composer writing for a miniscule audience, or even in a hostile environment, as long as the REASON for writing and the CONTENT of the music satisfies my own personal aesthetic criteria as already given.

You seem to be attracted mostly to the ideas and music of composers who never had a wide audience, who are not part of the 'canon'. Why?

There are many answers to this question. Firstly there is the natural support for the underdog. Secondly there is the fascination of discovery of the unknown; the musicologist in me revels in the musico-archeological uncovering of music completely or partially covered by the debris of history. Thirdly, there is the insatiable curiosity—a genuine curiosity—of which I have been the victim for many years and which eventually forced me to become a musicologist. Lastly there is a recognition that the established 'canon' preaches a linearity of history which is neat and logical; I actually don't believe that the real world is so.

But all this must be tempered by the fact that the rediscovered music must be worth rediscovering, i.e. performing/recording/studying. So far, I am grateful that my probings have been rewarded by lighting up some worthwhile dusty corner of history.

Your answer to that question immediately begs the next: how can one tell what is worth rediscovering? By what criteria do you personally decide that an 'obscure' composer's music is worth your effort? Maybe the music has been allowed to become submerged in the 'debris of history' for some very good reasons.

The interpretative shape of music history is another interesting question. I certainly agree with you that the linearity implicit in the canonic interpretation is unrealistically 'neat and logical'. Much more useful to my mind is the conception of the shape of history as a (not very smooth) spiral or series of interconnected spirals—implying a high degree of cyclicalness and complexity of relationships—which is propounded, I think, by George Crumb (incidentally a composer with whom you would seem to have some strong affinities).⁴ How do you respond?

A concept which has long troubled me (along with most people who think about music!) is the notion of music as a communicative force. What sort of 'personal vision' do you believe it is possible to communicate through or in music, and how is that communication achieved?

You are of course correct—much music that has been forgotten is justly so, and some of the stuff I've unearthed at other times has proved to be negligible. It's not enough to be 'forgotten' or 'obscure' or even 'worthy'. Playing music simply for curiosity's sake is not good enough and I would not inflict such music in public. You've seen my music collection: the house is full of lifeless archeological discoveries. My current work on the piano music of Anton Rubinstein is a case in point:³ undoubtedly, he wrote too much, too unevenly, close to routine salon...yet, I've proved—in public—that some of the music 'works' and the reason why it works was what intrigued me: it was the great input from the performer. I'm not in any sense equating myself with Rubinstein as a pianist, but it's very clear that certain pieces were rapturously received by the public because of what he injected into them. The same pieces played today by our text-conscious performers appear to be 'dead' and uninteresting. So it's the performing tradition that comes from Rubinstein that interested me and whether the tradition could be re-used. His own pieces seemed an ideal guinea-pig. I've played all the major works and recently the cello sonatas with Aleksander Ivashkin who also comes from a similar background. We proved that the sonatas could hold an audience, but only if the text was treated with great freedom. I'm talking not just about rubato and a rhetorical way of playing, but also my intrusion into the notes themselves, as though Rubinstein had merely sketched the piece and not fully written it out. All very dangerous, I know, but personally intriguing. So in the end, the music must work for me. But I can only find out by actually getting my hands dirty.

I've never thought of George Crumb and myself having strong affinities, but you could well be right! As far as history is concerned, I've always thought that *music* history (I wouldn't pontificate on *general* history) is made by composers i.e. individuals. Scholars then tend to explain the appearances and work of these composers and shape them into some kind of coherent picture.

I guess my 'archeology' is related to this question in that I can sometimes wonder whether certain composers are 'excluded' from the canon because they don't fit the linear concept of a particular period. Naturally one mustn't over-simplify such an idea, as no doubt there are social/economic/national pressures that also shape composers and their music. But I am continually impressed and moved by the strength and single-mindedness of the human spirit—against all obstacles there are these possessed individuals, sitting in their little rooms, creating their own music. It's a slightly romantic picture of the creator, I know, but not without truth. We have examples from Australian music that you know about. What drives these people? It's a lonely, risky, often silly occupation. One can't be doing it just for ego massaging or some notion of posterity/immortality. It doesn't gel and doesn't account for years spent pursuing a personal vision...

What a difficult question! People become composers because they are trying to say something that cannot be said using words, maths, architecture etc. either alone or in combination, although such elements are important and exist in the organization of sounds. Music interests me as a primal force, owing its origins to ritual, religion, magic and mysticism. It is this hidden ('occult') power of music that is MY chief concern and which accounts for many of my titles as well as the atmosphere of much of my music. Music, then, as a conjuration of sorts, with its power to play on our emotional centres, is what concerns me as a composer. It comes from an

initial inner stillness and retreats back into it when the piece is over (many of my works begin and end softly). Composers so inclined develop their own techniques. The question is difficult because I have no way of judging how successful my techniques are in communicating this kind of personal vision. In my case, a kind of deliberate ambiguity (smudging) occurs in the music to try to give it an enigmatic quality. This is a PERFECT example of how useless words are to describe what we are talking about! But I want to stress that real composers (artists) have something to say and struggle to find a way to say it. We also have plenty of composers with loads of technique and not much to say—they are craftsmen rather than artists. We are now producing them in droves.

To what extent do you allow other performers to take the same approach to your own music that you take to Rubinstein's (and presumably others')? Are you happy with the idea of your text being treated with great freedom by performers other than those for whom you originally wrote a work?

I'm DELIGHTED when other performers take a free approach with my own music and I hope that my rhapsodic style of notation actually encourages such an attitude. Sometimes I hear performances which I mightn't like—or that I hadn't thought of—but I don't think this matters that much. The essential core of the music remains and is what I have notated, the rest is up to the performer. If I have a very clear notion of the speed, I use the metronome, otherwise, it's all left to the imagination of the player. I subscribe to Busoni's attitude to the printed score and direct you to his writings on the questions of Notation and Transcription.⁵ There are some very interesting ideas contained in his essays.

Given the importance of being a composer-pianist to your conception of music, how different is your approach to composition from that of someone who is a composer alone?

There must be some differences, even just from the keyboard orientation that is inevitably present in animals such as myself. But I think the question brings up the larger and more important question of composers not being performers these days and getting degrees without 'getting their hands dirty' i.e. never experiencing and therefore never understanding the 'other guy's' point of view. I know that this will sound fuddy-duddyish, but it is hard for me to condone the concept of non-performer composers, using performer in the broadest sense. Just take our Australian scene as an example and piano music in particular: how much feeble, ineffective, timid, un-idiomatic stuff has been written by composers who are not also pianists in the real sense of the word. I should know: I've played some of it!⁶

There is a good reason why pianists and composers were one and the same person until historically speaking quite recent times, and I needn't go into those reasons here: they are perfectly obvious. Before the advent of the piano, many of the major composers were keyboard players, and before that, they were string players and probably singers. The popularity of the keyboard as a compositional resource and expressive medium for composers makes the exceptions stand out even more. Berlioz, for example, was one: he played the guitar, a harmonic instrument. Wagner played the piano competently enough, but was a great conductor.

Without over-labouring the point, I am plugging the sheer PRACTICALITY of the keyboard for the composer. It's very difficult for a non-pianist to write idiomatically for the piano (you are welcome to wrack your brains for exceptions); on the other hand it seems far simpler for a pianist/composer to write effectively for other, single line instruments. There are fairly simple physical reason for this phenomenon. One can argue that the computer can now give us aural realizations of a score instead of the piano.⁷ That's true of course, but apart from the realization (which should be in the composer's head anyhow) there is still the question of understanding the limits and temperament of the performer. We are in some danger of alienation here, and the alienation has already happened and is very real in

some quarters. I have some horrific stories to tell about some of our composers who can't hear what they have written and certainly have no idea of the level of difficulty in their music.

I would hope that my music gains by dramatic impulse, flair and rhapsody by being written by a concert performer. It well might suffer from something also as a result, but as Berg once said 'I do not wish to depreciate my works thereby, since others who do not know it so well can do that much better'.⁸

A potentially frivolous question with which to finish: how do you think you will be remembered?

You're being tough. I would like to be remembered as someone who went and did it. But I'm not quite ready to write my epitaph yet!

Apropos all this, Confucius wrote in the *Analects*: 'To learn and then to practise when it is timely, isn't that the meaning of pleasure? To have friends come from afar, isn't that the meaning of joy? Not to regret it when one's learning is not recognized, isn't that what it means to be a true scholar?'

Notes

¹ A detailed discussion of this manuscript collection is contained in Patricia Shaw and Peter Campbell, 'Seeking pearls in a magpie's nest: The Larry Sitsky papers', *Voices* 5.1 (Autumn 1995), pp.47–60.

² *Music of the repressed Russian avant-garde, 1900–1929*, Contributions to the study of music and dance 31 (New York: Greenwood Press, 1994).

³ Sitsky is currently compiling an annotated thematic catalogue of the piano music of Anton Rubinstein (Greenwood Press, forthcoming).

⁴ See *Profile of a composer*, ed. Don Gillespie (New York: Peters, 1987).

⁵ Busoni's principal writings on these topics are *Versuch einer organischen Klavier-Noten-Schrift* [Attempt at an organic keyboard notation] (Leipzig, 1909), rpt. as an appendix in the *Bach-Busoni gesammelte Ausgabe*, vol. 7 (Leipzig, 1920), and 'Lehre von der Übertragung von Orgelwerke auf das Klavier' [Instruction on the transcription of organ works for the piano], *Bach-Busoni gesammelte Ausgabe*, vol. 5 (Leipzig, 1894). Sitsky has himself commented on both of these writings, respectively: 'Ferruccio Busoni's "Attempt at an organic notation for the pianoforte", and a practical adaptation of it', *Music Review* 29.1 (Feb. 1968), pp.27–33, and 'Transcriptions and the eunuch', *Quadrant* 10.5 (Sept.–Oct. 1966), pp.30–34. See also Sitsky's *Busoni and the piano: The works, the writings, and the recordings*, Contribution to the study of music and dance 7 (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986).

⁶ Sitsky is here referring to some works from the collection *Contemporary Australian Piano*, ed. L. Whiffin and H. Reeder (Melbourne: La Trobe University Press, 1985), which he recorded in its entirety (Move Records, MD 39066CD, 1988).

⁷ I am not in any way suggesting that this sort of usage constitutes appropriate or imaginative use of the computer as a compositional tool.

⁸ Alban Berg, Postscript to *Wozzeck* (1931).