

Patronage of the composer

Francis Routh

The single most striking, and most disturbing, fact about musical Britain as we enter the 80s is the continuing absence of enlightened, discriminating patronage of the living composer. Our musical culture is overwhelmingly performer-orientated; it has been so for many years. And while one must not detract from the importance of first class performers, it must not be forgotten that in any live tradition the composer's place is central. Yet concert statistics show that this has been forgotten. By far the majority of operas, concerts, and recordings are drawn from the enormous legacy of the past; few indeed contribute to, or even recognise, the music of the present. Distortion results, and a parasitic culture; for if a musical society is to bequeath anything of value to those who succeed it, it must make some positive provision both for the present and the past.

So what is patronage? The term is distinct from merely financial subsidy. The term 'patronage' implies a true concern for contemporary culture, in all its aspects, allied with a knowledge of the past, and a sense of the historical evolution of the musical art; it implies taste, judgement, artistic experience, coupled with a sense of adventure, a willingness to take risks. Performance goes without saying. Patronage begins with the composer today. It implies taking him seriously.

Artistic decision, and choice, lie at the root of patronage. Patronage of a composer begins when that composer, one individual, is selected by the patron. It means that not only is he rewarded financially for his composition, but just as important, his work is given a certain public advocacy, and of course a public performance. The ability to choose, and to differentiate between composers good, indifferent, and bad, from the total of some five hundred or so actively engaged in composition in this country today, is the first and perhaps most difficult requirement of patronage. It is inescapable; and the task is made more difficult by the absence of an accepted standard of aesthetic judgement. The choice calls for a deep knowledge and experience of current traditions, to say nothing of the ability to size up adequately the evidence of a composer's work, style and potential, and to see round the next corner. To choose an artist means to be an artist.

If you were an eighteenth century prince, a wealthy aristocratic patron, your patronage of a composer would give him not only financial and professional status; it would also endow him with some social importance. If your sense of culture was more than superficial, and your taste was broad and catholic, your choice of whom to patronise might well lead to lasting artistic results, and influence profoundly the music of your age. Your personal prestige, by no means the least consideration, would automatically be greatly enhanced, and your name perpetuated. The great courts of Mannheim or Esterházy were, and are, household names.

Yet now, in this country, what is our situation today? In the absence of true patronage, what have we in its place? In a word, subsidy. The chief source of this is still the Arts Council, and it is therefore important to examine the purposive reasoning behind its distribution of financial assistance. The total amount available to the Arts Council in 1979-80 was £64 million, of which less than one quarter of 1% was distributed to composers (£150,000), or just over three quarters of 1% of the amount allocated to all musical activities. One hundred and fifty composers received widely varying sums of money.

The Arts Council seeks to serve the public as a whole, largely by helping to pay for performances; and where would composers be, it asks without performances? It points out that one should not consider direct awards to composers in isolation, since a number of groups and orchestras who receive subsidy have in turn benefited composers by performing their music. Naturally orchestras and other performers play largely the sort of music

that, in their opinion, the public wish to hear; and the Arts Council disclaims most strongly responsibility for public taste. In no sense does it make its subsidies conditional on what should or should not be played. The recipient's freedom of artistic decision and choice is regarded as absolute, inviolate.

This side-stepping of the first and most crucial responsibility of the patron, namely the intelligent, creative discrimination between one composer's work and another's, results in a *laissez faire* approach, which can be measured by analysing the concerts of the four London Orchestras, and also the Chamber Orchestras, who next to the national opera houses, and some other bodies throughout the country, received the largest proportion of subsidy, through the London Orchestral Concert Board.

London (South Bank) — 1979-80 season

	No. of concerts	works played	works by living composers	works by living British composers
<i>Orchestras</i>				
London Symphony	38	110	4 (3.6%)	2 (1.8%)
London Philharmonic	35	90	6 (6.6%)	4 (4.4%)
Royal Philharmonic	39	108	8 (7.4%)	4 (3.7%)
Philharmonia	38	103	8 (7.8%)	5 (4.8%)
<i>Chamber Orchestras</i>				
London Mozart Players	12	48	1 (2%)	1 (2%)
English Chamber Orchestra	16	63	8 (12.7%)	7 (11.1%)
London Sinfonietta	9	53	5 (9.4%)	3 (5.6%)

Total number of British composers represented: 13

These figures speak for themselves. Given freedom of choice, the London orchestras perform little if any contemporary music. Their planners demonstrate an unawareness of the range of work, indeed of the existence, of the living composer in their midst, to say nothing of his necessary place in our musical culture, that can only be described as staggering. It seems that they are concerned first and foremost with their own survival; the huge renaissance of creativity today is virtually ignored. Yet there are more composers at work today than at any time before in our entire history; their styles range from the most *outré* to the most conservative; and even if one allows for those whose work is not of London concert standard, there is still a formidable number whose work presents a compelling challenge. So the question posed by the Arts Council — 'where would composers be without performance?' — is given a very definite, if ironic answer by the London orchestras. They would be precisely where they are now. The truth is that, left to their own choice, the self-governing orchestras do not see themselves as patrons of the living composer.

What few attempts the Arts Council makes to promote concerts itself directly, which shall include contemporary music, illustrate all too clearly that absence of a valid, generally-accepted standard of judgement already mentioned. You cannot suddenly, mysteriously create one by the time-honoured device of setting up a committee. A committee may well be the appropriate means of ensuring that the distribution of public funds is reasonably fair and above-board; it is the most inappropriate means of establishing aesthetic standards. The Arts Council, with its plethora of panels, stands as a fearful monument to what happens if you try to mix artistic judgement with bureaucratic procedures in this way. It exhibits an almost

unfailing ability to promote the third-rate; its 'Contemporary Music Network' is a subsidized ghetto of gimmickry. Meanwhile, by a cruel irony, an important part of creative talent in this country is left still unnoticed and unsupported. You cannot, after all, see the view if you are facing the wrong way.

Where else is the composer to seek patronage in this country? What about the BBC? The BBC is far the largest purveyor of music; but once again statistics show that sheer quantity should not be mistaken for true patronage. The overall picture is far from reassuring:

BBC broadcasts (Radio 3) — November 1979 - October 1980

Total hours	Average hours each week	works played	works by living composers	(hrs)	works by living British composers	(hrs)
5,000	96	15,000	1,476	(533)	798	(285)

Total number of British composers represented: 280

As well as studio performances, BBC output also includes public concerts, which are broadcast or relayed. Here too we notice that the proportion of music by living composers is small:

BBC public concerts — 1980

	No. of concerts	works played	works by living composers	works by living British composers
Promenade Concerts (Royal Albert Hall)	37 *	127	13 (10.2%)	9 (7.1%)
All other public concerts and recitals	207	645	76 (11.8%)	47 (7.4%)

* 20 concerts cancelled (18 July – 6 August) due to musicians' strike

Total number of British composers represented: 35

The committee origin of these concerts, and of the decisions reached in the process of planning them, is very apparent. For example, new music was brought forward, and commissioned, from a rank-and-file Soviet composer named Alfred Schnittke; Russian music has also featured elsewhere in BBC performances. Why? Both these facts can only be explained by the appointment of Gennadi Rozhdestvensky as chief conductor of the BBC Symphony. Again, we notice with surprise that the Festival Hall season of concerts, an important focal-point of

BBC music-making, included a new work by an obscure composer called Michael Gielen – who happens to be the principal guest conductor of the same orchestra. Such *quid pro quo* arrangements are an inadequate substitute for a proper aesthetic criterion of music. They are the very reverse of true patronage.

If the BBC planners are frequently inept in their sponsoring and commissioning of new work, they are more successful in providing a shop-window for important works whose origins lie elsewhere. One of the great successes of the Promenade Concerts was the Penderecki *Violin Concerto*, recently recorded by Isaac Stern, for whom it was written; another even greater success was the Tippett *Triple Concerto*, commissioned by the LSO to mark Tippett's 75th birthday year in 1980 – to say nothing of the orchestra's 75th birthday year in 1979. It seems that the extent of BBC patronage can be measured by its giving performance to works which might otherwise not be heard in this country. The fact of performance is one aspect of patronage, and an important one; but it is not the whole story.

More directly, we may deduce from our present experience, if we did not already know it, that without proper patronage the contemporary composer's work is not performed; and contrary to appearances, this is not just a question of money; for the giving of money, or subsidy, in no way involves artistic decisions or choices. Subsidy involves the giving of a sum of money to support the work of a particular group, or organisation, without which it would either collapse or incur huge financial losses. Covent Garden for instance (a familiar whipping-boy) is subsidised to the tune of £7 million not so that it can perform Wagner's *Ring*, or Berg's *Lulu*, or ApIvor's *Yerma*; these are matters calling for artistic, not financial decisions; but Covent Garden is subsidised because it is 'a great national institution'; because it is there, and without subsidy it would cease to be there. Inflation alone, and the urgent appeals of Sir Claus Moser, will ensure that the amount of subsidy increases annually. So the Arts Council provides nothing more, and nothing less, than the financial means for its existence. It in no way exercises the function of patron, that is to say artistic judgement or restraint on the operas performed. Similarly in the case of other companies, and orchestras, a sum of money is handed over to enable them to exist.

But the question of artistic judgement of new music, which is what patronage is all about, has to be exercised by *somebody*. And it is interesting that the absence today of true patronage (except perhaps to a very limited extent on the part of the BBC), by some strange irony, by no means reduces the sheer quantity of composers' works. What it does reduce is the possibilities of performances of all but a handful; this is because the artistic performance-decision, instead of being taken by the patron, is left to the performer, who, finding himself faced with a huge mass of non-differentiated works, is reluctant if not unqualified to make any such choice. In the case of the orchestras, more often than not the choice is not made at all; they merely rely on familiar 'names' – a notoriously inadequate substitute for a

proper criterion. The low performance-figures of living composers' music, combined with the low level of direct financial support to the living composer, together provide unmistakable evidence of a lack of purpose, an emptiness at the core of our musical culture.

Denied true patronage, the composer is driven to seek other outlets in an attempt to get his work heard. Maybe he himself becomes his own performer; maybe he, or his publisher, indulges in extravagant public relations and propaganda. But propaganda is indiscriminating, with the result that time and energy are often wasted on the third-rate, as we have seen.

So the need for patronage today stands out very clearly. Without it the contemporary composer lacks an intelligent and well-disposed advocate, and his work will probably not be adequately performed. Patronage seems to suggest three indispensable stages; first there must be a conscious and deliberate

artistic choice as to which of our five hundred composers merit performance; next they must be rewarded financially; finally their work must be performed. A formidable task indeed, and one requiring a radical change from present procedures. Yet to omit any of these three stages would be to invalidate the whole process. As it is, British music today is cut off at source, denied sustenance by the lack of patronage, which ensures that it remains a tributary only, not flowing into the mainstream of European music, but deriving from it. The excessive reliance by performers on repetitive performances of safe classics, together with a lack of inquisitiveness and concern for the present, are different aspects of the same unhealthy pattern.

The true patron would encourage the very opposite response. He has something of the visionary in him, while the breadth and sureness of his powers of judgement would ensure that he moulds the epoch in which he lives.