

# Composing contemporary music for amateur performers

Simon Hopkins, January 2022

## 1. Introduction

This paper addresses the question: “Is it plausible to write contemporary music for serious amateur musicians?” I initially set out to address a secondary question: “What are some of the key technical and practical concerns in writing music for amateurs?” In the event, I address this secondary question only as an outline for further areas of research. Both questions are part of an ongoing enquiry into what it means to be an amateur composer in the current environment, and are based on my own continued practice both as a composer and amateur classical guitarist myself.

After some definitions and a discussion around the very notion of amateurism, I go on to look at the change in attitudes to classical music performance from the mid-late 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards. I then turn to some approaches by radical composers in the 1970s and the current state of affairs in contemporary music regarding amateur players. I briefly outline some technical concerns discussed above and finally draw some overarching conclusions.

This paper is largely based on desk research and my own practice. Additionally, I interviewed the renowned guitarist and composer Vincent Lindsey-Clark (who has composed for amateurs of all levels) and my long-term tutor Gregg Isaacson, who specialises in teaching “advanced” students. Other conversations with fellow amateur players have also proved invaluable.

## 2. Definitions

In her celebrated 1989 survey of amateur music-making in Milton Keynes, “The Hidden Musicians”, Ruth Finnegan sets out the problem of defining what an amateur actually is: “... the at first sight “obvious” amateur/professional distinction turns out to be a complex continuum with many different possible variations.”

But pragmatism requires drawing a line somewhere. In choosing collaborators, I consider a “serious amateur” as a one having a playing ability from Grade 6 to Performance Diploma (standards set by such internationally recognised examination boards as the ABRSM and Trinity). If the lower limit here seems a little low, I draw on my own experience as a student: as early as Grade 6, Trinity introduces such contemporary work as Dušan Bogdanović’s “Jutarnje Kolo<sup>1</sup>”, a rapid Balkan dance in 11/8 in lydian dominant that incorporates several “extended” techniques.

If the definition of “amateur” is tricky, that of “contemporary music” is even more protean. For the sake of this essay, I will confine the term to formally written music that draws on

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cKbdOY1AQnY>

one or more of the post-Romantic compositional techniques comprehensively outlined by Stefan Kostka in 1990.

### *3. Arguments around “amateurism”*

And so to amateurism. The root of the word itself is often touted as showing how it is misunderstood – even abused - as a term. As Charlotte Higgins observed in a 2010 “Guardian” article about amateur classical musicians, “Derived from the Latin verb ‘amo’, to love, amateur, strictly speaking, means ‘one who loves or is fond of; one who has a taste for anything’”.<sup>2</sup>

The artistic professional/amateur dichotomy was explored at length by the philosopher Lewis Hyde in his seminal 1979 work “The Gift”, in which he grappled with the inherent difficulties in making art as a “career”. Hyde argued the artist that the artist should “serve his gifts on their own terms... if he cannot do [this]” he will create “work that has been created in response to the demands of the market, not in response to the demands of the gift”.

Arguably the rise of so-called “Web 2.0”<sup>3</sup> since the early noughties has been a golden era for high-level amateurism in all creative areas, and certainly in music. In a paper co-authored with Sarah Turner for Ofcom in 2013, I myself claimed, somewhat breathlessly, that “the spread of [User Generated Content]... represents a profound shift in the relationship between the media, consumers and technology.”<sup>4</sup>

It should be said, however, that not everyone concurs. In his 2020 polemic, “The Death of the Artist”, William Deresiewicz puts it bluntly: “Great art, even good art, relies on... individuals who are able to devote the lion’s share of their energy to producing it – in other words, professionals. Amateur creativity... should not be confused with the real thing.”

### *4. Amateur performance and classical music*

Until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, performance by amateurs was a key way in which most people in Europe would have heard new composition. Advances in instrument manufacture and the expansion of the music publishing industry led to a demand for manuscripts of new music (often orchestral works or opera in piano reductions) for performance at home. Several phenomena began to disrupt this paradigm. The rise of the virtuoso composer-performer (Liszt is the exemplar) in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century arguably began the demise of home performance of new music, with much new composition demanding high levels of technical ability<sup>5</sup>. The twin introduction of phonography and radio at the turn of the last century

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2010/jan/18/amateur-classical-music-in-uk>

<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/w/web-20.asp>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/internet-and-on-demand-research/internet-use-and-attitudes/user-generated-content>

<sup>5</sup> The 19<sup>th</sup> century concert hall/parlour dichotomy is outlined clearly and concisely in this Metropolitan Museum essay by Jayson Kerr Dobney: [https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/amcm/hd\\_amcm.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/amcm/hd_amcm.htm)

brought the most virtuosic performances directly into the home. What need then for it to be *performed* domestically?

And if the rise of public virtuosi saw the beginning of the end for home performance of new music, the advent of Modernism was the nail in its coffin, with an explosion of radical new techniques (and even concepts) beyond even the most gifted amateur. As composer Henrik Frisk wrote in 2017: "Even if today there were still bourgeois salons with plenty of opportunities for amateurs to meet and play, it would not be contemporary music... Can we even imagine a musical amateur engaging in the performance of Boulez' Piano Sonata No. 2 or Ligeti's Etude at a social gathering at home?"

Of course, throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, composers did continue to write occasionally for amateurs, from Bartók's pedagogical work to Britten's writing for boys' choirs<sup>6</sup>. Nonetheless, by the Darmstadt high modernist era, contemporary music had become to be a solidly professional pursuit.

### 5. *The post-modernist turn*

By the late 60s, a turn towards amateur creativity was in the air, and specifically as a political tool of the New Left. The French cultural philosopher Roland Barthes had already begun to stake a claim in these particular culture wars. "If Barthes was happy to be an amateur he nonetheless gave this word the weight of a serious critical designation. The practice of an amateur is 'counter-bourgeois' insofar as it manages to escape commodification, having been made for the pleasure implicit in production itself, rather than for monetary gain or cultural status." (Suchin 2003)

European composers with radical politics of their own responded in kind. In 1969, the Maoist British composer Cornelius Cardew founded the Scratch Orchestra, comprising professional and amateur performers alike to perform his large-scale works such as "The Great Learning"<sup>7</sup>. While the work was challenging to listeners' sensibilities, it was essential to Cardew that the work was open to *anyone* to play<sup>8</sup>. "Cardew wanted to create musical scores that could be performed by people who lacked the learned body of knowledge traditionally required to understand them." (Court, 2017)

In 1970, "...swept up in the sometimes rampant politicized iconoclasm that characterized the immediate cultural aftermath of the upheavals of 1968" (Currie, 2011), the young double bassist and composer Gavin Bryars formed the Portsmouth Sinfonia, comprised of professionals (but often playing specifically *not* their given instrument) through to complete beginners. Where the Scratch Orchestra played new work by their founder, the Portsmouth Sinfonia tackled works from the Classical canon, from Beethoven's Fifth to Holst's "Planets" suite. At the time, the results were either derided or else seen as a novelty act (and the

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<sup>6</sup> I have, by and large, excluded choral and opera work from this essay, despite it being a rich seam. The late British opera director Graham Vick was especially celebrated for his work with amateur choruses and in bringing the art form to new, excluded audiences.

<sup>7</sup> <https://open.spotify.com/album/04qbdogqBfTaN1Rw4wlWlq?si=wVl5Hjc9T1Grf6ocl9kPOw>

<sup>8</sup> Although it should be said that Cardew's "conducting" was notoriously exacting and that even some accusations of bullying were made at the time.

performances were, it has to be said, uproarious and at times very funny indeed<sup>9</sup>), but the intentions were political and anti-bourgeois.<sup>10</sup>

And this was a truly international moment. The radical and highly political Dutch composer Louis Andriessen first gained notoriety for disrupting a Concertgebouw Orchestra orchestra performance in 1969 and went on to form the somewhat Brechtian street performance ensemble, Orkest de Volharding. His 1971 “Volkslied” – a mashup of the Dutch national anthem and the communist “Internationale” – was specifically written for amateurs, or even, again, complete beginners. (Adlington, 2013)

## 6. *The current scene*

These experiments might now be seen as something of a historical curio, but they have left a deep legacy. In the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, some of this radicalism has not so much disappeared as been absorbed into a more widespread egalitarianism in the contemporary music scene. To cite two examples:

In the UK, the organisation Contemporary Music for All<sup>11</sup> is dedicated to promoting “participation in new music-making as a meaningful and essential part of our lives”. Composers in their impressive catalogue include such diverse luminaries as Jonathan Harvey, Sally Beamish and Mira Calix<sup>12</sup>.

For 60 years, in the US, Bennington College’s annual Chamber Music Conference<sup>13</sup> has enabled players of a range of abilities to come together and play contemporary music, and is responsible for commissioning new, appropriate work. Composer Andrew Norman<sup>14</sup>, who has worked at the Bennington festival, has said of working with amateurs there: “So much professional music making is about making a product: Let’s put this together and get it out there... As a composer, I’m always looking for that new, interesting sound and pushing boundaries and making an experience for the audience that they’ve never had. With amateur playing, it’s not about that at all. It’s about writing music that is interesting and gratifying to play.” (He goes on to add: “It’s remarkably tricky: how to simplify one’s language to the point where it can be played by amateurs,” something echoed by Roland Dyens, below.)

None of this is to suggest that the world of amateur classical music is a cornucopia of modernist experimentation. It’s worth noting that the only truly modern music cited in Finnegan’s book is rock and jazz; the classical music mentioned is entirely from the mainstream and ends at the late Romantic.

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<sup>9</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LsFFvthfEZg>

<sup>10</sup> Although Bryars has since deemed Cardew’s elision of politics and music as “a category error”. (Griffiths, 2011)

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.coma.org>

<sup>12</sup> Not to mention the aforementioned Andriessen and Bryars.

<sup>13</sup> <http://cmceast.org/>

<sup>14</sup> <http://andrewnormanmusic.com>

## 7. Challenges: an outline for further research

Writing innovative music for non-professional players is not as easy as might at first be thought. In the preface to his “20 Lettres”, a collection of solo pieces for classical guitarists “with anything between three and six years’ tuition behind them” (that features pastiches of, among others, Messiaen, Debussy and Ravel), the French guitarist-composer Roland Dyens wrote: “... combining good quality music with relative ease of play has always seemed to me the most difficult thing in composition... perhaps a greater challenge than writing a concerto!”

In my own practice, and through the conversations I cited above, I’ve identified several key areas of special concern:

- Reading levels
- Timing
- Extended techniques
- Speed/fluency
- Interpretation
- Intra-group competence differences

And then there are of course such practical issues as rehearsal time and performance opportunities<sup>15</sup>. It is also clear that if composer-performer dialogue during the composition process can be very fruitful in the professional realm (Goss, 2020), it is *essential* in the amateur one. These issues form a potentially fruitful source of further research.

## 8. Conclusion

It is inevitable that much modern(ist) repertoire is beyond the reach of the amateur performer. Composers will always need to write music that requires its performers to, as Deresiewicz puts it, devote “the lion’s share of their energy” to their playing. But does the existence of the “Hammerklavier” preclude amateurs from playing other contemporaneous music? I think not.

Ultimately, I conclude that it is possible for contemporary composers to create work that is experimental, and indeed rigorously modernist, that need not require conservatoire-level ability from its performers. The desire to do so might have a political motivation, or might not. The motivation might simply be based on a collateral benefit of creating such work, that it can propagate a deeper interest in contemporary music in its performers (and their audiences). As Frisk concludes in the article cited above: “What I would wish for, and what I try to do, is to go full circle: to invite the audience to take part again, to join the performance.”

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<sup>15</sup> Although these pertain, of course, to professionals.

## 9. References & bibliography

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