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PREVIEW

**A PERFORMER'S GUIDE TO CREATING A LISTENING ROAD MAP:
APPLICATIONS TO LATE TWENTIETH-CENTURY SOLO FLUTE
COMPOSITIONS BY AMERICAN WOMEN COMPOSERS
JOYCE MEKEEL AND JENNIFER HIGDON**

by

Deena K. Reedy

A DISSERTATION

**Presented to the Faculty of
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements
For the Degree of Doctor of Musical Arts**

Major: Music

Under the Supervision of Professor John Bailey

Lincoln, Nebraska

August, 2002

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DISSERTATION TITLE

A Performer's Guide to Creating a Listening Road Map: Applications to
Late Twentieth-Century Solo Flute Compositions by
American Women Composers Joyce Mekeel and Jennifer Higdon

BY

Deena K. Reedy

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GRADUATE COLLEGE
UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA

**A PERFORMER'S GUIDE TO CREATING A LISTENING ROAD MAP:
APPLICATIONS TO LATE TWENTIETH-CENTURY SOLO FLUTE
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JOYCE MEKEEL AND JENNIFER HIGDON**

Deena K. Reedy, D.M.A.

University of Nebraska, 2002

Advisor: John Bailey

Listening to new music from the twentieth century carries with it many stigmas and pre-conceived notions (e.g. that the music will sound unpleasant or that there is no order or structure to contemporary works). In order to overcome these barriers, the following document provides a template to assist the performer in presenting late twentieth-century works to an average audience (i.e. persons who have limited opportunities to hear the classics and have little or no musical education background). Like research is examined for its relevance to the process of listening to contemporary works, insight into the growth of skepticism toward the new is provided, and the importance of listening in order to develop the appropriate expectations for twentieth-century works is explored to help create the template or Listening Road Map. This Road Map is then applied to the lecture recital, illustrating its usefulness in presenting late twentieth-century compositions to an average audience. Information included in the lecture is structured in such a way as to assist the average listener in understanding and accepting these late twentieth-century works by eradicating the preconceptions mentioned above. The detailed analysis of two solo flute works of the late twentieth

century by American women composers—Joyce Mekeel’s *The Shape of Silence* and Jennifer Higdon’s *rapid.fire*—is the beginning of the process of helping an audience to listen intelligently to these kinds of works. The Listening Road Map (described in chapter one) is used as a model for paring down this analysis in order to present these works in an accessible manner (described in chapter three). Appendices with original research about the compositions (based on phone interviews and email correspondence) are included. A partially annotated bibliography concludes the document.

PREVIEW

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This document would not have existed without the assistance of both John Bailey and Brian Moore. Your differing perspectives on the world of music helped me to envision a work crossing the often well-defined borders between performing and music education. Dr. Bailey—for your willingness to see this project through, your intellectual insights throughout the process and your prompt responses to my questions, I am grateful. Dr. Moore—for your encouragement that such a work could eventually exist and your assistance in organizing and refining my thoughts, I thank you. I would also like to acknowledge the efforts of Joseph Kraus—for your impeccable attention to detail in the final stages of reading—and of George Ritchie and Joan Reist—for your help in completing this document in the midst of the summer. I would also like to acknowledge Judith Bentley for introducing me to the wonderful world of contemporary music, including *The Shape of Silence*, and for instilling a desire to unearth the possibilities of late twentieth-century works.

I wish to thank Jennifer Higdon for her readiness to share information about her career and for making herself available to offer insight into her composition, *rapid.fire*. Musical examples from *rapid.fire*, copyright 1992, are reprinted with permission from Jennifer Higdon. The musical examples included from Joyce Mekeel's *The Shape of Silence*, copyright 1983, are used by permission of C.F. Peters Corporation.

To my family—I appreciate your patience over the last six years. Thank you to my parents for supporting me during the writing process. Finally, to my mother—for your constant encouragement and love throughout this process and over the course of my entire life—I dedicate this work to you.

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PREVIEW

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The twentieth century has seen a dramatic metamorphosis in the style of its compositions, so much so that works from the beginning of the century bear marked differences from those of the late twentieth century. Robert Morgan, in fact, defines the century in ten to twenty year style segments leading up to the situation today, in which he declares “we have only a range of shifting alternatives and provisional choices. No common thread binds together today's composers, unless it be their common unwillingness to make a single, permanent choice.”¹ Due to this rapidly changing compositional environment, many listeners who encounter late twentieth-century works on a concert or recital program are often skeptical about their capacity to enjoy the piece without having heard a single note. Ulrich Bumann suggests in his 1973 article, “New Music in Search of Listeners”, that “a large section of the public no longer wants to listen to the New Music.”² He cites a study by German educators Brömse and Kötter, which examines the reception of music by young people. It states as one of three “known” facts that “New Music always meets with rejection.”³ While “always” is perhaps a bit overstated, new or contemporary music does indeed have a long way to go to gain widespread acceptance. In fact, Lebrecht reports an interesting trend in the role of classical music and its waning acceptance in society during the twentieth century. “Back in 1900, music and opera were mass pursuits that crossed class barriers and played in every small town. Sport was the idle pursuit of the rich... Between the world wars, sports acquired an organizational framework, while music entered a

¹Robert P. Morgan, *Twentieth Century Music: A History of Musical Style in Modern Europe and America* (New York: Norton, 1991), 486.

²Ulrich Bumann, “New Music in Search of Listeners” in *International Society for Music Education Yearbook 1*, ed. Egon Kraus (New York: B. Schott's Söhne, 1973), 86.

³Ibid.

communicative crisis in which many composers pretended to ignore their audience. These trends, together with the piping of radio into private homes, diminished popular involvement in classics and increased the following for sport.”⁴ While this shift in popularity and acceptance may be attributed to many causes, this document will focus on examining the overall climate and sentiment that may fuel this persistent skepticism for new music, and will offer a model for drawing audiences back to the contemporary concert.

In order to discover the path to acceptance, three main questions are important to consider: (1) Where does this lack of acceptance originate?; (2) Why does it continue to exist even after the twentieth century has drawn to a close?; and (3) How can this lack of public acceptance be changed? As a performer who enjoys hearing and playing the compositions of the late twentieth century, I believe the answer to bridging the gap between initial unfavorable reaction and eventual acceptance lies primarily in preparing the average concert-goers for things they may hear that are unusual or different from their expectations. Ottó Károlyi confirms this course of action by stating that, “dislike of a work of art is often based not so much on well-informed taste and opinion as on fear of the new, which results in the defensive blocking off of both mind and emotion.”⁵ Alluded to earlier, there is not the same predictability in compositions of the twentieth century that existed prior to this time—no one set of standards defines the compositions of this era. Many new compositional devices are used to create works with a voice of their own in a rapidly changing world. These include: hard to sing melodies, non-Western influences, non-traditional/ non-triadic/chromatic harmonies, quickly shifting meters and tempos, irregular rhythms and new notations which help to bring new sounds from the imagination to the

⁴ Norman Lebrecht, *Who Killed Classical Music?: Maestros, Managers, and Corporate Politics* (Secaucus, N.J.: Carol Publishing Group, 1998), 400.

⁵ Ottó Károlyi, *Introducing Modern Music* (New York: Penguin, 1995), ix.

page, the performer and ultimately the listeners.⁶ These characteristics of twentieth-century composition are often difficult for a poorly prepared, inadequately musically educated listener to absorb. However, only in music are its creators expected to speak in a language of the past—for example, writers would not succeed with the general public by using dialects of the past and are not expected to do so.⁷ By examining the level of understanding, experience, expectation and overall perception of the average music listener for compositions of the late twentieth century, a plan can be better defined in order to codify a method for introducing the novice listener to late twentieth-century pieces.

Origin of Skepticism for “New” Music—Perception and Expectations

Brömse and Kötter discovered in their study that “music that the young people categorised [sic] as being strange or unknown was at the same time judged to be ugly, and conversely, what was viewed as being familiar and well-known was held to be beautiful.”⁸ This reflects the general trend with all listeners, according to Bumann: “[W]e take pleasure in what is known, and reject what is unknown”, sometimes because the unknown demands such close attention and effort by the listener in order to understand the work and overcome preconceptions about it.”⁹ When listening to a piece of music where everything is surprising,

⁶ Many of these twentieth-century characteristics are described in detail in chapters one and two of Károlyi’s *Introducing Modern Music* in terms of how they relate to listeners’ sensibilities.

⁷ Aaron Copland, *What to Listen for in Music*, rev. ed. (New York: New American Library, 1967), 149.

⁸ Bumann, 87.

⁹ Ibid.

such as music from another culture, atonal music, aleatoric music, etc., John Sloboda (cognitive psychologist) believes that “emotions begin to disengage.”¹⁰

Although these findings would seem to support that lack of acceptance for contemporary classical music may partially stem from alienation caused by some of the more unusual and complex pieces of the twentieth century, (and the efforts involved in deciphering them), complexity and audience skepticism is not new in the world of music. In fact, examples of classical music audiences failing to immediately embrace “new” pieces of music extend back to the Classical era and beyond. “Always the main cry against new music, from Beethoven's to Boulez's, has been that it was incomprehensible, not ugly or faultily composed or expressively repellent, as if all music had to invite the listener into itself as openly as does the music of the 1780s and 1790s...”¹¹ From the premiere of Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro* in 1786, which challenged the public in that it was different from the norm of simplicity of the time, more complex harmonically, contrapuntally, and dramatically¹²; to the premiere of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, which caused rioting in the theater; to performances of the most recent compositions of today, the sentiment regarding things that are different and “new” is often not overwhelmingly favorable at first. Today, audience members may equate any twentieth-century work with one or two pieces they know about or have heard from the early part of the twentieth century. Sometimes composers of such works, beginning with Schoenberg, purposefully alienated the audience by constructing their pieces in a very complex and highly intellectual manner, thereby

¹⁰Michael Oliver, ed., *Settling the Score: A Journey Through the Music of the Twentieth Century* (London: Faber, 1999), 218.

¹¹Paul Griffiths, *The String Quartet* (Great Britain: Thames and Hudson, 1983), 42-43.

¹²Philip G. Downs, *Classical Music: The Era of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1992), 531.

excluding the masses from understanding their art.¹³ Schoenberg is quoted as saying, “If it is art, it is not for all, and if it is for all, it is not art!”¹⁴

Why Does Skepticism Continue? Changing Public Acceptance Through Perception, Level of Understanding and Experience

Due to the strikingly different style of composing in the twentieth century, which often introduced change and complexity in search of an original way of expressing oneself musically, the audience grew farther away from understanding the classical music composer.¹⁵ Often, adding to an audience's uncertainty and lack of understanding, are the well-meaning remarks of performers who continue to place negative images and connotations into audience members' minds in the form of apologetic introductions to a “new” work. These introductions can come in statements such as: “even though you may find this hard to listen to, there is a very interesting technique that is used to portray the pain of battle”¹⁶ when describing the band composition *Chester*; and—even though this is a twentieth-century piece/not what you're used to hearing, it is a pretty tame work compared to most of the twentieth-century compositions written for this type of ensemble around this time—to describe a brass quintet piece¹⁷; and—for those of you who don't care for this type

¹³ David E. Walden, *How to Listen to Modern Music Without Earplugs* (Toronto: Sound and Vision, 1999), 71-72.

¹⁴ Ibid. 69.

¹⁵ Ibid. 116-117.

¹⁶ Floyd Weil, conductor, Green Valley Concert Band concert, Green Valley, AZ, 4 April 2000.

¹⁷ Mike Walk, trumpet player, Tucson Symphony Orchestra Brass Ensemble concert, Green Valley, AZ, 16 January 2000.

of music, it won't last long—in reference to a short solo flute composition by Robert Dick¹⁸; and most recently—“So what *was* that piece of music anyway?”¹⁹—to begin a brief explanation of John Adams’ *Chairman Dances*.

The above comments made by professional musicians might have been worded differently, using other turns of phrase to introduce the works in a more unbiased and neutral manner. But truthfully, who amongst musicians has not heard or possibly alluded to similar types of explanations when hearing or performing a piece of contemporary music? It is important to remember that where professional musicians may take these comments in the light-hearted, joking manner in which they are generally intended, non-professionals may gain a different and more serious message from these sentiments.

If an audience is struggling to understand and it observes people on the stage struggling, then it's going to get the impression that something's mighty wrong, and the whole thing feels very awkward and uncomfortable. So what an audience wants to see is a performer appearing to be totally within the piece, understanding its hidden message and performing it with great aplomb which therefore means showing its style. It's hugely important, I think.²⁰

Terry Edwards, choral conductor

Louisiana State University Professor of Composition and Area Coordinator, Dinos

Constantinides, approaches the problem of audience reception of a new work from a slightly different perspective. In the *College Music Society Newsletter*, he points out that modern-day composers are educated in a system that is overcome with new demands on the college music curriculum, making it difficult to focus in a concentrated way on the great composers of the past.²¹ Since audience-members often “begin their interest and love for good music

¹⁸ Jennifer Reagan, flutist, Flute Recital, Tucson, AZ, 7 October 2000.

¹⁹ David Commanday, conductor, Peoria Symphony Orchestra concert, Peoria, IL, 3 March 2001.

²⁰ Oliver, 248.

²¹ Dinos Constantinides, “New Music and the Audiences,” *The College Music Society Newsletter—Electronic Version*, pt. 1 of 4 (January 2001), [e-journal], cms@music.org (received 16 January 2001).

through the classics” and new composers may not, the audience for contemporary music is often lost.²²

Too often, the perception of the audience's opinion about certain works is over-analyzed. Perhaps we might simply prepare the audience for what they will hear by presenting factual aspects of the work in question (i. e. what types of effects they will hear, the overall formal structure they might listen for, unusual harmonies which provide a certain atmosphere, etc.) and leave the opinion making to the listeners. Gillian Moore, Artistic Director of the London Sinfonietta, states:

We've had the most extraordinary reactions to Ligeti, to Birtwistle—to composers that concert audiences often find too complex to listen to—from the innocent ear: from children who haven't heard any concert music at all, or from their parents who come up and talk to the musicians and make the most profound and perceptive comments about the music that has been performed.²³

I have also had very positive encounters with audience members after performances of pieces that showcased numerous unusual extended techniques. Generally, at least a few people ask to see the score to discover how unusual effects are notated. These situations help to demonstrate that if audiences are allowed to experience the music of the late twentieth century in a neutral environment, it is likely that a natural curiosity will develop as well as a possible desire to hear the piece again to gain more insight. Ultimately, if given the opportunity to experience late twentieth-century works in a positive manner, accompanied by a brief explanation of unusual elements in the piece, concert-goers have a better chance to draw conclusions about whether or not they like a particular new piece of music and why. Károlyi supports this position, stating that, “familiarity dispels anxiety.” He suggests, “It

²² Ibid.

²³ Oliver, 311.

would be better to replace the saying ‘I know what I like’ with ‘I don’t know what I could like.’”²⁴

NATURE OF THE STUDY

Audience Education: Bridging the Gap Between Past and Present Compositions

In order to help audiences build style-specific expectations for late twentieth-century music, they must first accept that comfort and/or easy listening is not necessarily a goal in many contemporary compositions. In previous centuries, composers were employed by the aristocracy and churches, for which they wrote music designated for specific events and audiences. In the twentieth century, in the absence of the traditional music patron of centuries past, “composers may well feel that they cannot do otherwise than write the music that they are inspired to write, regardless of whether the public is ready to appreciate it.”²⁵ In some cases, as described above with Schoenberg, deliberate attempts to alienate the audience are the result. However, John Paynter has a different view of Schoenberg’s compositions. He chooses to see the compositional efforts of Schoenberg and his students as an attempt to “stretch our sensitivity”²⁶ to new possibilities. Paynter suggests instead of viewing new sounds as “confusing and irrelevant... see them for what they really are: new—and perhaps exciting—sound possibilities...” “[The composer] is not making unusual sounds just to be different!”²⁷ It is also important to remember that whatever side

²⁴ Károlyi, x.

²⁵ Oliver, 197.

²⁶ John Paynter, *Hear and Now: An Introduction to Modern Music in Schools* (London: Universal Edition, 1972), 19.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 20.

one takes on the issue of composers like Schoenberg, many contemporary composers deliberately seek to embrace their audience (i.e. John Corigliano) through their singable melodies, use of familiar forms, and the like presented in a twentieth-century idiom. Constantinides informs his students “that the most successful composers of the 20th century, both American and European, are also connected with the past.”²⁸ However, alienation from twentieth-century music has grown and persists not necessarily because of the language in which composers choose to express themselves, but because we as professional composers, performers and educators have not done enough to dispel the perception of the era as a whole by making a conscious effort to see that a certain number of contemporary pieces are included in mainstream concerts, and by offering unbiased, factual accounts of the music we present to an audience. Paynter suggests that it’s up to us to embrace the new music now, because things will be different by the time we do. However, “it’s no use waiting and hoping that in time we may in some mysterious and effortless way come to grips with the new music. By the time that happens the whole situation will be different.”²⁹

If the main point or points are highlighted for the listener through program notes or a lecture, “An expected stimulus will be perceived and understood more rapidly than would otherwise be the case.”³⁰ This is confirmed by Karen Zumbrunn’s guided listening study, in which she came to the following conclusion: “Teaching for music appreciation through contemporary music alone did increase students’ perception of the aesthetic elements of contemporary music. Seemingly, it is only through exposure to contemporary music that

²⁸ Constantinides, [e-journal].

²⁹ Paynter, 23.

³⁰ Leonard Meyer, *Emotion and Meaning in Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), 79.