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## **New Music: The Value of Creativity**

By Stephen John Strouse

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*Stephen J. Strouse is currently a second-year student at Bowling Green State University who is pursuing a bachelor's degree in music performance on the trumpet. Stephen's interest in writing about new music began after attending the New Music Festival at Bowling Green State University. In his essay, "New Music: The Value of Creativity," Stephen explores potential reasons why new music receives mixed reviews from audiences and critics, as well as some benefits of this art form's existence. Stephen Strouse resides in Perrysburg, Ohio, where he graduated from Perrysburg High School in 2016.*

A pianist walks onto stage to the sound of applause, takes a bow, and sits at the piano. The musician opens the lid of the piano and positions their hands to play, but they do not immediately press any notes. Seconds start to tick by, then minutes, as the piano player continues to sit motionless on the bench, without a sound to be heard resonating from the piano. After about four or five minutes of silence, the performer proceeds to stand up, yet to strike a single key, and take a bow, to the sound of thunderous applause. This pianist performed the piece "4'33"" by John Cage, in which the performer sits at a piano for four minutes and thirty-three seconds without sounding a single note. This is one of many contemporary, or "new music," pieces, that have been written. In classical music, the terms "new music" and "contemporary music," which can be used interchangeably, refer to a type of experimental music. While most classically trained musicians will generally understand what the term "new music" refers to, it can be a difficult term to define, which is partially because there are no limits on what a composer can do in this style. Some of the experimental elements in this style that I have observed at Bowling Green State University include putting ping pong balls and erasers inside of a piano, removing tuning slides from instruments, filling a trumpet with water before playing it, or growling and singing through a brass instrument. Other pieces might call for the use of electronic sounds or ask that a piece be performed in the dark. Sometimes composers of new music will also draw pictures, scribbles, sketches, or lines on a piece of paper in lieu of music notation and ask that the musician play their interpretation of the image. This type of music may seem strange to someone who has never seen it before, and there are mixed opinions about whether these types of compositions hold artistic value. Although this type of music may be different than what most people are used to, it is still a valuable art form, and should be respected as such.

One type of contemporary music is atonal music. Almost all music that people regularly listen to, including most pop, rock, classical, jazz, country, etc., is tonal music, meaning it is set in a certain "key," or has a certain home base note. Atonal music does not have this. Instead, it uses all notes equally. It can be difficult to comprehend what this type of music is without listening to it, but to someone who has never heard this type of music before, it may sound reminiscent of a cat running across a piano. Despite the seemingly random combinations of notes, writing a piece of atonal requires much thought and planning.

An article published in *Frontiers in Psychology*, which was authored by Alice Proverbio et al., found that “Listening to instrumental atonal music...was associated with reduced heart rate (bradycardia) and increased blood pressure...compared to the tonal condition. [These are] associated with interest and attending to a stimulus...anxiety...psychological tension and agitation” (Proverbio). Atonal music can be uncomfortable for people to listen to at first. Because there is no tonality to latch on to, it can be hard for new listeners to make sense of what they are hearing. It may not be that atonal music is inherently anxiety inducing, but that it is simply different from what people usually listen to. This could be a possible explanation for why the listeners had an increase in tension and anxiety. If atonal music was more common, it is possible that this form of music would not cause anxiety. Furthermore, for people who are unfamiliar with it, it might be worth trying. In a *Forbes* article by Sujana Patel titled “Why Feeling Uncomfortable Is The Key To Success,” the author writes that “Routines may make you feel at ease and in control, but what a constant routine really does is dull your sensitivities...when you go out of your way to experience new things, or when you let new things happen to you, your body creates brand new neural pathways that fuel your creative spark and enhance your memory” (Patel). Even if trying an unfamiliar form of music causes discomfort at first, it could be beneficial.

Additionally, even if atonal music does cause tension, that does not mean it cannot be entertaining. As Walter Horn writes in the article “Tonality, Musical Form, and Aesthetic Value,” which was published in the summer 2015 issue of *Perspectives of New Music*, “At least since Kubrick’s *2001 A Space Odyssey*... way back in 1968, both film and television soundtracks have been rife with both ‘noise’ and atonal ‘classical’ segments. If these soundtracks have been considered unpleasant or without aesthetic merit by audiences, I would think that producers would get away from that practice” (Horn). For decades, atonal music has appeared in movies and television shows, meaning that many people may have heard atonal music without even realizing it. There is a place in film for music that causes tension. For example, imagine that there is a scene from a science fiction movie where a mysterious object from space crash-lands into an abandoned field in the middle of the night, and someone who is nearby, possibly the only person around for miles, is approaching it to investigate it. A producer would likely choose harsh, discordant atonal music to be playing in the background of such a scene, as opposed to, say, a beautiful, light, bouncy, Mozart flute sonata. It is fitting to pair atonal music with a scene that is intended to be suspenseful, and many audience members would likely appreciate that decision. One reason that people listen to music is to feel a certain emotion, whether that be happy, sad, or angry. While it is unlikely that the average listener would want to sing along to atonal segments of music from of movie soundtrack, or jam out to Schoenberg’s “Erwartung” while doing chores around the house, music that makes the listener feel uneasy has situations for which it is suitable, just as much as music that people associate with joy.

Even if not everyone enjoys listening to new music, it can also be used as a training tool for music students. Timothy Groulx’s article in *Journal of Research in Music Education* titled “The Influence of Tonal and Atonal Contexts on Error Detection Accuracy” describes the results of a study comparing error detection abilities of music education students using both tonal and atonal music, which found that “The results of this study, combined with those from existing literature, suggest that pitch errors were clearer in tonal music with transparent textures; characteristics of much music literature composed for younger musicians” (7). Error detection is an ear training exercise in which a listener hears a passage played while looking at the music notation for what was played. There are intentional errors made by the performer, and the

listener must determine where errors occurred. Exercises such as this are used to help music students learn how music notation relates to what the music sounds like. This can be useful in training music educators and conductors, as being able to quickly recognize mistakes can help them better instruct an ensemble. Because there are certain patterns that are expected in tonal music, it is easier to determine if a mistake was made than in atonal music. Even if the listener did not necessarily know what the tonal music that they are looking at was supposed to sound like, they can reason through where potential mistakes could be made using their knowledge of musical structure. However, when there is no tonal structure, it forces the listener to focus on each note more carefully, to know exactly what each note is. Walter Horn also writes in his article, "Tonality, Musical Form, and Aesthetic Value," that "When one fails to understand a piece of [atonal] music...it is because one cannot follow and anticipate its course. One has no sense of being directed toward musical goals, of synthesizing sections into intelligible sequences in the process" (Horn). If universities taught music students to detect errors in atonal music, it would force them to know what each note should be, which could develop their musical ear to a higher degree than what would be required to detect errors in tonal music. After learning how to error detect in atonal music, it could become easier for them to detect errors when the tonal structure is added back in.

There are also mixed opinions on the avant-garde techniques used in new music. In the article "Searching for Silence John Cage's Art of Noise," published in *The New Yorker*, the author, Alex Ross, discusses the piece "4'33" by John Cage. Although Ross seems to have a positive opinion of the piece, he also acknowledges that "'4'33" is still dismissed as 'absolutely ridiculous,' 'stupid,' 'a gimmick,'...Such judgments are especially common within classical music, where Cage...remains an object of widespread scorn" (Ross "Searching"). Many classical musicians look down on the idea of sitting at piano without playing anything and calling it music. Indeed, many of the ideas and techniques used in new music may seem ridiculous to other musicians. Yet, even if some of this music seems extreme, it creates a space for musicians to try new ideas. Sergey R. Yagolkovskiy performed a study titled "Stimulation of Individual Creativity in Electronic Brainstorming: Cognitive and Social Aspects," which was published in *Social Behavior & Personality: An International Journal*. It examines whether being exposed to unique ideas affects how well someone can brainstorm. As part of the experiment, subjects were either exposed to unusual, or more obvious ways to use a ruler and were then instructed to think on their own of other possible ways to use a ruler. Yagolkovskiy concludes that "rare stimulus ideas [have] a positive effect on creativity" (Yagolkovskiy). When someone is exposed to unorthodox ideas, it can lead them to think more creatively. Even if some of the techniques experimented with in new music seem unusual, they could encourage other musicians to be more creative. And, even if not all the ideas in new music catch on with mainstream classical audiences, the existence of this type of experimental music allows for more creativity.

While many of the methods that new music composers use may not become common practice, the existence of this type of music creates an atmosphere where out of the box thinking is encouraged. Additionally, music is not unique in allowing for experimentation. In the *Huffington Post* article "Is Art Pointless," by Phoebe Dodds, she writes "Imagine being able to paint one dot on a canvas and then selling it for a crazy sum of money, just because it has your signature on it... I get that it's meant to be about the idea behind the exhibit, but even so, there's a limit" (Dodds). In visual art, there are artists who paint very little and call it art. Even though

new music may seem unusual, it is similar to the experimentation that has been seen in visual art. In fact, a canvas with a dot on it could be the visual equivalent of John Cage's "4'33". Music is not the only art form with avant-garde ideas that are dismissed by the viewers. As Dodds also notes, "Modern art does raise the interesting question: what constitutes art?" (Dodds). There are doubts in the realm of visual art just as there are in music, but modern art is still displayed in many museums. In fact, modern art is increasing in popularity. According to the *New York Times* article "Can the Old Master be Relevant Again?" by Robin Pogrebin, "contemporary art is all the rage among collectors...many experts are questioning whether old master artwork — once the most coveted — can stay relevant...auction houses appear to be devoting most of their attention and resources to contemporary art, the most popular area of their business" (Pogrebin). In the realm of art, modernism is so popular that it is even surpassing the level of popularity seen by older masterpieces. As art has evolved over time, the followers of visual art have supported the changes and new ideas that occur. This has not happened in music. In the *Guardian* article "Why do we hate modern classical music," the author, Alex Ross, explains that "The core problem is, I suspect...modern composers have fallen victim to a...relationship with the past. Even before 1900, people were attending concerts in the expectation that they would be massaged by the lovely sounds of bygone days. ("New works do not succeed in Leipzig," a critic said of the premiere of Brahms's First Piano Concerto in 1859)" (Ross "Why do we"). While many people cherish the work of Brahms today, not everyone appreciated it at the time Brahms premiered it.

For some reason, focusing on composers of the past seems to be part of the culture in classical music. Even if music that is being composed today is great, the classical audience is generally set on wanting to hear the old masterpieces, which could cause them to overlook potentially great compositions by modern composers. Even back when Brahms, who is today considered one of the most prolific classical composers of his time, was writing music, the audiences still wanted to hear works of the past. This idea that only music of the past is important is holding music back. At the time that Brahms' music was being created and premiered, it was looked down upon. On the other hand, the work of Brahms is very respected today. Many classical musicians label Brahms as one of the "three Bs," along with Bach and Beethoven, grouping these three together as some of the most important composers of their time. Even the music of Beethoven received criticism when it was being created. Brandon Nelson sums this up well in his post "The Critics vs. Beethoven," noting that "Critics of this symphony were, as was becoming the norm, somewhat divided. In Austria, it was well received, but in Germany critics and connoisseurs were unanimously of the opinion that Beethoven must have been "intoxicated" when he wrote it. Weber is said to have expressed the opinion that Beethoven was 'now ripe for the madhouse'" (Nelson). This is comparable to the situation surrounding new music today. We see a divide between people who appreciate it and people who think, similarly to the criticism of Beethoven, that someone would have to be crazy to write something in such a manner. While today people would almost unanimously agree Beethoven's work is ingenious, it still received criticism during its time. In classical music, there seems to be a necessity for a work to exist for a while before it is accepted. Alex Ross even goes so far as to say that "The music profession became focused on the manic polishing of a display of masterpieces. By the time Schoenberg, Stravinsky and company introduced a new vocabulary of chords and rhythms, the game was fixed against them...they could not overcome, except by drastic measures, the disadvantage of being alive" (Ross, "Why do we"). This could be explained by new scientific evidence, which suggests that people might be inherently biased against new ideas.

A study published in *Psychological Science* titled “The Bias Against Creativity,” by Jennifer S. Mueller, et al., writes that “The results of Experiment 2 both replicated the finding that uncertainty promotes negative associations with creativity relative to practicality and extended this finding by showing that the bias against creativity interfered with participants’ ability to recognize a creative idea” (Mueller). Creative ideas will always have some opposition at first, merely because they are new. Part of the reason classical music audiences could tend to prefer older works could be that it takes time to accept new ideas. When a new type of compositional idea is introduced, it will inevitably receive mixed opinions. However, over time the idea likely seems less creative or unusual, and people will adapt to the changes that have occurred. Instead of waiting a long period of time before embracing new ideas, classical music audiences should try to appreciate music when it is written, even if the techniques used seem unusual at first. However, the world of classical music could also be doing more to help people become accustomed to new music, instead of merely focusing on the past. Alex Ross explains that “Museums and galleries took a markedly different approach. In America, the Museum of Modern Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, and other leading institutions propagandised for modern art. Wealthy patrons embraced some of the most radical new work... museums could be sites of intellectual adventure.” Some of the more influential museums in the United States went out of their way to promote modern art, which has not happened in music. Major symphonies are not campaigning for new music the way museums advertised contemporary art, which is likely one of the reasons why the field of art is more receptive to modernism than classical music audiences are. The orchestras in the United States should follow the same model as the museums did, by advertising for new music, which could help draw excitement to new developments that are taking place, even if it does seem unusual. As Phoebe Dodds also writes regarding visual art “even if you hate it, maybe it’s the fact that modern art stirs some kind of feeling within you that makes it worthwhile and important” (Dodds).

Modern art evokes a reaction from the viewer, which is what contemporary music does as well. As with modern visual art, even if new music is disliked by some, it can still stimulate thought and inspire emotions in those who experience it, which is something that all forms of art can achieve. If music audiences are willing to accept new or experimental music, which orchestras can assist with through promotion, it can improve composers’ creativity, help listeners mix up their routine and create new connections in their brain, add suspense to movies and television shows, and even assist music education students with their training. Although it will likely be unfamiliar at first, contemporary music can be useful and entertaining, and it is a valuable form of expression.

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