

Boola Boola Revisited
by Orlando Jacinto García

Slightly more than 15 years ago, soon after finishing my doctoral studies, I had the great fortune of studying with Morton Feldman for 3 intensive weeks. These sessions proved to have a great impact on my career as a composer and pedagogue and I was fortunate to be able to count Morty as a friend as a result of those three weeks. One day not long after his death in 1987, I came across an article he had written entitled "Boola Boola" published in a collection of his essays by Berlinger Press, in which he strongly criticized academia. At first this seemed a bit contradictory; he was after all a Professor of Composition at SUNY Buffalo when I met him. However the article written much earlier was still consistent with the criticisms he continued making even after he was in academia. Given my own continual strong criticisms of the composition world in the US (which consists of large numbers of people involved with academia), I have been challenged by several colleagues to write a short article expressing my concerns at the end of the 20th century. The following is a summary of these concerns.

As we reach the millennium, unbeknownst to many of the participants, we find the Art music world in the US in a state of disarray and chaos, mired in a mediocrity few eras have known. Perhaps we the composers/teachers are at fault; the victim of our efficient technology where all kinds of information is made available to everyone with an immediacy not known before. We will try to teach almost anyone just about anything (after all who needs talent when you have technology). Unfortunately, the result has been that those without talent, musicianship, musicality, or imagination, have been invited to join and subsequently invaded our ranks. This situation is the accumulation of decades of work by the composer mills around the country propagating and justifying faculty teaching positions at the expense of quality while at the same time graduating mediocrity. This situation has reached a point where the majority of the 20,000-30,000 so-called composers of Art music in the US (figures compiled by the American Music Center); many of whom have or have had some affiliation with a university, are "successfully disseminating" their technically barren, unimaginative works throughout the university systems of our country and to some extent even parts of the rest of the "world".

I use the term “successfully disseminating” in quotes because a large percentage of my colleagues don’t live in the real world and, as such, successful dissemination is a relative term. Unknown to many of my colleagues, a performance by the university choir or the faculty pianist at their or another university does not generally constitute a performance in the real world, pedagogical relevance notwithstanding. Concerts where the audience consists of composers listening to composers is not the real world. Concerts where the audience consists of music students listening to composers is not the real world. Concerts where students are performing these works, generally, is not the real world. Unfortunately, due to the overwhelming numbers of mediocre composers pushing their wares, any university performance can and is considered successful dissemination by my colleagues since much of this music would rarely, if ever, be performed outside of the university system. Please note that by this I am certainly not implying that music needs to be dumbied down to exist outside of academia, but more on this later.

When I read the bios of many of the so called relatively successful university composers in the US, they are chock full of citations about performances at this university or that university. In short, the Art music scene in the US has been brought down to amateur standing by the university composer.

The university has become the triple A ball, the NCAA of the Art music world and the composer organizations and their conferences most often basically provide the tournament or world series. Unfortunately (or fortunately, depending on your perspective), most composers never leave the minor leagues. The alternative to being presented at these events for many is not writing and/or receiving performances. In some ways this may be preferable given what I am hearing around the country.

The so called post-modern culture we live in where synthesis, a look at the past, a plethora of styles, points of view, aesthetics, etc. are all viable, has also been another catalyst for the opening of a Pandora’s box of mediocrity. There is no better place where this is evident than in the conferences/festivals of so called Art music (whether it be acoustic or electro-acoustic or both) around the country where out of more than 100 “curated works” that are being performed you are fortunate if you hear 1 or 2 with anything to say. Most of the works consist of a "gray" blend of aesthetics with each composers presenting his or her "mix". Professional, high quality soloists and

ensembles who do live in the real world, do not become interested in someone's works because those works were played at numerous university conferences.

They often become interested because the music has something to say (regardless of aesthetics or style). Of course all of the composers that I am discussing in this article will assume that they have something to say and that I am addressing someone else. If your music is not traveling among the professional world, whether it be Festivals abroad or professional first rate ensembles in the US (and I don't mean the wind ensemble at a university in Texas or the hand bell choir at some school in Maine) then I am talking about you. This is not to say that a composer's music should not be heard at a university. Many of us are pedagogues and, as such, students should be exposed to our work. Nevertheless, with extremely few exceptions, if that is where the majority of a composer's works are being performed, then something is wrong.

In the age of government cut backs, anti-quality, anti-substance (whether it be in education, the arts, or elsewhere), many of my university colleagues are on the pseudo-ethno, pseudo-jazz, pseudo-Mozart, pseudo-Strauss populist bandwagon. Let's write a music that will sell to the new NEA or its eventual new version, regardless of substance, imagination, or craft. Pretty melodies are back. Let's reach out to the condo-commandos at the retirement home; they do so love nice chamber music. Let's see what we can appropriate from another culture-probably Hispanic, Asian, or Native American folk music since these seem to be a big hit today. How about recent popular culture? The 50's, 60's, and 70's are quite in vogue today. Let's extract some tunes/quotes from the Pop Icons, TV shows, etc. of the time and try to add a few "twists".

Recently at a national festival one of my colleagues whose music does travel, exclaimed to me while listening to piece after piece of mediocre "gray" conglomeration of aesthetics, "haven't any of these composers ever heard of Stravinsky, Varese, Webern, or Cage." I briefly replied, "if they have (and who knows), in these composers' minds those aesthetic won't fly today, that music is not "catchy" or "pretty" enough, so why should it be considered." Of course there is and has been the other side of the coin. The ultra pseudo-sophisticated technology, pseudo-ultra abstraction folks listening to their own and their colleagues works since no one else will. Finding solace in their schematics, diagrams, algorithms, software and hardware, rather than in their music. Fortunately (or unfortunately, depending on your point of view), to some extent the post-modern aesthetic climate has more or

less diminished their relevance (except amongst themselves) although one never knows when the next “New pseudo-ultra abstraction” movement will flare up.

But let's be honest, an individual with some real imagination and craft can create a work of Art whether it be by using total serialization, chance procedures, minimalism, a neo-Strauss, neo-ethnic, avante-garde jazz aesthetic or whatever. The problem is not necessarily in the style or procedure, but rather by the fact that many composers feel that the style or procedure that they employ validates what they do, whether what they create in that style has anything to say musically. How many times can people write works based on *4'33"* or *Pierrot Lunaire* ? Not many, given that the original version just about said it all, conceptually and otherwise.

What is lacking in American Art Music? Auto criticism. It doesn't exist. Why? Because a great many of the composers that I am citing have been brought up in a period of time where you're okay and I'm okay and everything is great. We are all just great artists. We can all do whatever we want, no matter how bad. None of these composers ever ask themselves if what they do has any merit or benefit. Some basically just did what they had to do to finish graduate school and once they got out, kept doing it. For others it was rebel against what they were doing in graduate school, now that post-modern times are here, let's let it all go and Rock and Roll no matter how bad the result may be. Others were having post-modernist fun by letting it go before they graduated. How many of my colleagues and their students have ever tried to detach themselves from their work objectively and rigorously critique it? Few at best and as a result we are all suffering.

To add to the confusion in post-modern times, a tango, a rock tune, and a Mozart symphony are all the same. Music is Music everyone says (I'm okay, you're okay). Very few stopped to consider that Art music may be different due to something other than stylistic considerations. People stopped asking themselves what is Art (not an easy question) and decided to take the easy route and say it's all the same. The Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Rap tunes, Hip Hop, Stravinsky, Wynton Marsalis, Cage, Hootie and the Blowfish, the Art Ensemble of Chicago-it's all the same. Let's all just write nice tunes. Well friends, I am afraid that it is not all the same. Art music has always been more abstract and challenging than functional music. It is not entertainment, although many would like to market it as such, and those that can't take this fact should get out of the business and focus on writing arrangements for the Boston Pops (if they have the chops). Just like Michael Crichton is not James Joyce,

neither is listening to Madonna like listening to Webern, and we as educators are guilty of not dealing with this and/or challenging our students and ourselves with these notions. Is it better?

Are apples better than oranges? Probably not, but how many of my colleagues have discussed these questions with the faculty teaching music appreciation at their university? From the papers and presentations I hear around the country relative to this issue, not many. Elvis and Varese it's all the same. Morty would have loved it (in fact Morty would have said we need more lame uneducated composers like the mediocre majority that exist today so his work would stand out even more).

So, as we head for the twenty first Century, what is in store? More mediocrity I am afraid. Until composers find a way to be auto critical and universities find a way to limit the number of student composers they take in and graduate (and base this on quality and not numbers), I am afraid that the current state will continue. The word "composer" in the twenty first century will not mean very much given the current trend (not that it means much today). There just is not enough of a need for 20,000-30,000 composers of Art music in the US, especially when the majority have nothing to say and the US as a country is not interested in supporting the Arts. It will take a truly concerted effort by teachers to really think about quality and, if they can, overcome their own shortcomings.

The greatest thing I received from the composers that had an impact on my own musical consciousness was the importance of self-criticism and the great responsibility that the creation of Art brings with it. Hopefully, this trend will “flare up” somewhere in the future.