

Earlier this year Peter Meanwell asked me to write a text for the Borealis festival catalogue. This year's Borealis featured lots of work by composers where the physical, theatrical and visual aspects were as important as the sonic. This is something which is a focus of my own work and something I think about a lot, and I wrote the text included here about what I called "The New Discipline." I was happy to write this text because for some time now I've been trying to articulate my own thoughts about this sort of work, and over the last year in particular it has seemed a particularly timely topic. Borealis posted my text online and I found my social media feeds and inbox flooded with comments, discussions and arguments from composers all over the world. It is very clear that this way of working is urgent and vital to many, many composers and musicians.

To open up that discussion, I asked different composers working in this territory if they would like to contribute to this edition of MusikTexte. The composers included here are by no means an exhaustive or definitive list - there are many names that could just as easily have been included, for example Jagoda Szmytka, Michael Beil, Alexander Schubert, Solomiya Moroz, Ergo Phizmiz, Martin Schüttler, Lucie Vitkova. The texts here represent a wide array of viewpoints. There are texts from mid-career and established composers, as well as very young composers who are just starting out. This is not intended to be a musicological survey - it's a community talking to each other, and those conversations are in turns academic, playful, poetic and oblique. There are many more conversations to come.

There is a secret history of this music that's yet to be clearly documented and brought to light. Works that were made in a time prior to cheap video cameras, prior to YouTube. As a doctoral student at Northwestern University, I was massively inspired by works by my teacher Amnon Wolman as well as guests he brought to the university like Gerhard Stäbler. I saw many works live which had a huge impact on me - but today there are no proper documentations, they are not available online. I can only talk about these works with my students, describing pieces with a percussion quartet in handcuffs purchased at a sex shop, drummers playing on the heads of people wearing crash helmets, 11-hour techno operas performed in nightclubs, giant chunks of ice dripping onto the stage from raised platforms, singers floating on wires as a cellist plays their instrument with a meat cleaver. Paul Craenen's book *Composing Under the Skin* deals with the first decade or so of the 21st century and is an excellent contribution to the literature,

but deals exclusively with the European scene.

The New Discipline isn't an aesthetic - it's a way of working. For me, it provides a useful framework for discussion because it allows different compositions to be connected, to be viewed as differing in degrees rather than kind. Because it refers to a way of working, I can use the term New Discipline to talk about both pieces I think work excellently as well as those I think work poorly. For me, the term allows for a technical discussion of what is excellent or poor, because it seeks to interrogate how these pieces function on their own terms, to see the rigour and discipline and technical achievements. I'm a composer, not a musicologist - I'm not looking to create a term which is taken up by others, I'm looking to push my thinking forward and facilitate interesting discussions in my community.

The genre designations used for work I might term New Discipline are highly confusing and highly contested. The different designations trace the rich tradition of composers working with theatrical elements. No-one can quite agree - is it music? music theatre? composed theatre? performance? music with visual elements? visual music? opera? musical? instrumental theatre? live art? performance art? performative actions? physical actions? Glasgow-based performance collective Asparagus Piss Raindrop, who work very much in this territory, call themselves a "crypto conceptual science fiction anti-climax band" - this is no more or less accurate than any of the terminology mentioned above. In my text, I advocate for calling this work music for a variety of reasons. One reason is I will add to those in the text, is that I think we need be very clear - changing the terminology does not change where composers seek to have their music heard. Though these composers may at times be curated into theatre, art-world or dance contexts, their core community is usually a musical one. I'm not aware of many composers who work in this way who submit their works for performance art calls or seek to have their work presented at theatre festivals.<sup>1</sup>

Many of the composers involved in this work are also involved as performers. For some this is an aesthetic choice, for some it's the joy of a semi-chaotic DIY underground scene, for some it's simply a matter of practicality. For many of these composers the discipline manifests in an on-going practice, a commitment to working in this way. To putting on concerts, performing, to showing up, day

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<sup>1</sup> I'd also add that many composers who work in this way write works I might term "new discipline" as well as works which have little to do with theatre, depending on the context, ensemble, brief, etc.

after day, excited about the work, in an environment with at times depressingly little institutional support. This is particularly important in London, where I live, where everyone is crippled by the strains of surviving in one of the most expensive cities in the world. At the moment, in spite of the extreme stress of London, there is an incredibly vibrant, flourishing scene with multiple concert series of experimental music and a spirit of community where professional and student composers of all ages mix freely and happily.<sup>2</sup> And part of this vibrancy is the plethora of composers performing their own work, seizing some agency over the situation.

What makes this work extremely vital and exciting for me at the moment is that it seems new music as an institution is finally acknowledging that a body isn't a piano. An oboist playing *forte* against a violin playing *piano* is not the same as a male performer singing loudly over a female performer, or a white female performer talking loudly over a performer of colour. Different people, with their different bodies, mean vastly different things, are read in vastly different ways. In the last year or two in particular, as movements such as Black Lives Matter gained traction, as discussions around non-binary gender and trans rights pushed to the fore, as elite composers discussed their BDSM lifestyle openly, it seemed that perhaps it might be possible for new music to dive into *people*. To dive into something as complicated, messy, vibrant, problematic, terrifying, hilarious, infuriating and joyous as everyday life. Our everyday life here in the Anthropocene - our precarious, darkly euphoric existence on this rapidly-warming planet.

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<sup>2</sup> Interestingly enough, the urtext for a lot of UK-based composers seems to be Matteo Fargion and Jonathan Burrows' *Both Sitting Duet*.