

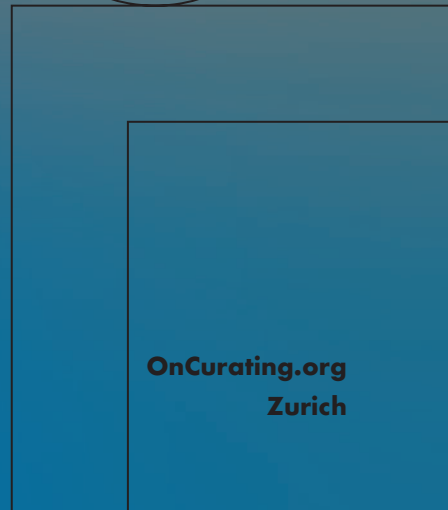
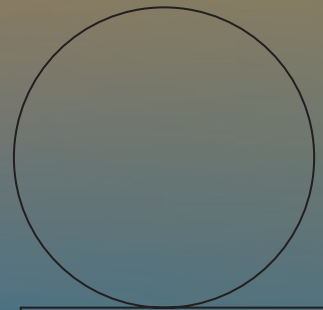
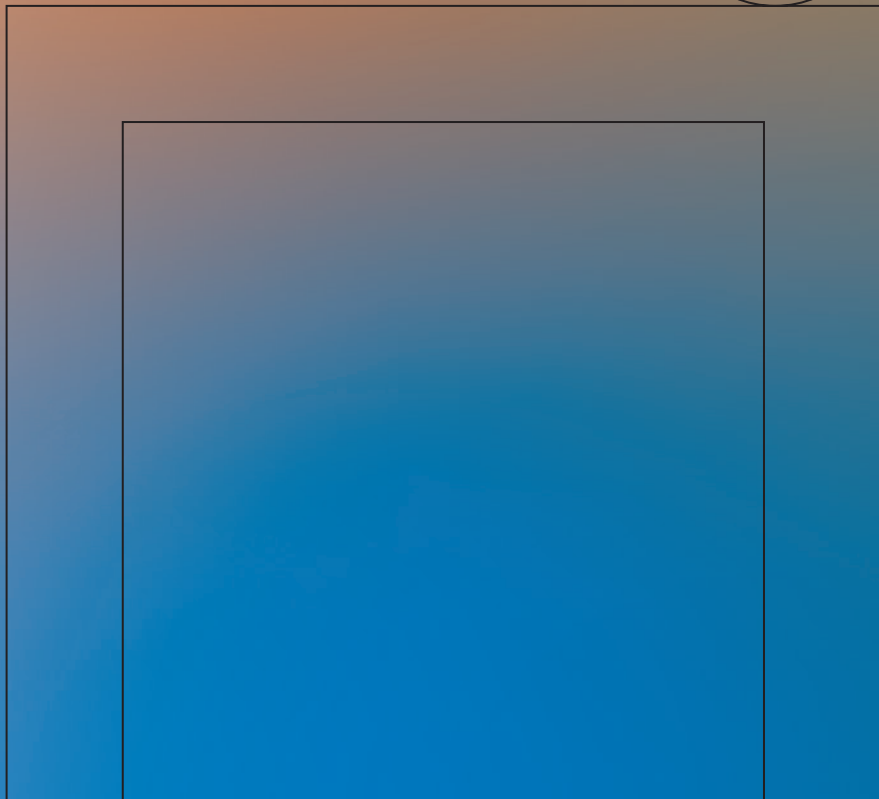
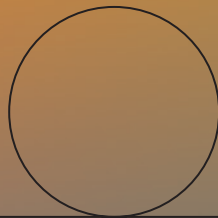
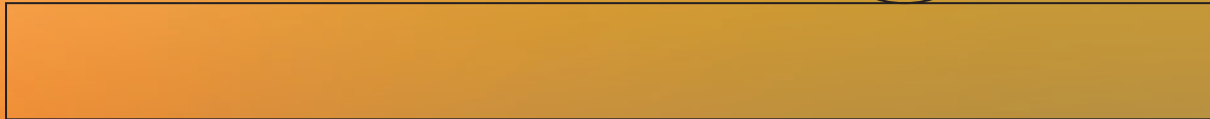
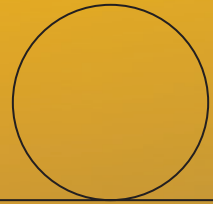
# Taking the Temperature

Crisis, Curating, and Musical Diversity

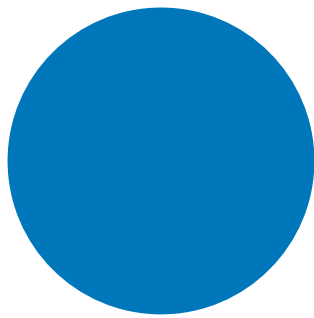
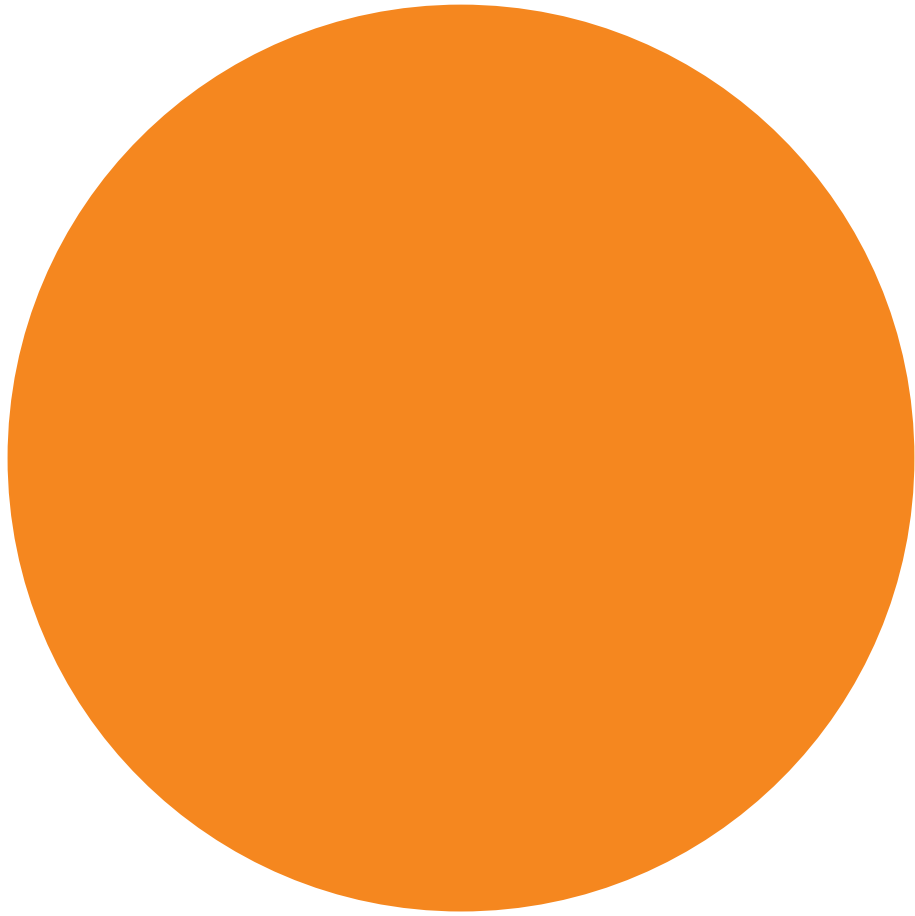
**Expanded Second Edition**

**Edited by**

Brandon Farnsworth, Anna Jakobsson, Vanessa Massera



**OnCurating.org**  
**Zurich**



# Taking the Temperature

Expanded Second Edition

**OnCurating.org**  
Zurich

## Published by OnCurating.org

OnCurating.org  
Pfungstweidstrasse 96  
8005 Zürich,  
Switzerland  
www.on-curating.org



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/> or send a letter to  
Creative Commons,  
PO Box 1866,  
Mountain View,  
CA 94042, USA

2 3 21 22 23

See inside back cover of publication for printing location and partner.  
ISBN: 9798711770350

The excerpt on page 202 is courtesy of The Pauline Oliveros Trust and PoPandMoM.org  
The excerpt on page 204 originally appeared in NewMusicBox, the web magazine from  
New Music USA and is reprinted with permission.

## Taking the Temperature: Crisis, Curating, and Musical Diversity

**Edited by:** Brandon Farnsworth, Anna Jakobsson, Vanessa Massera

**Cover, layout, design:** [www.asiapietrzyk.com](http://www.asiapietrzyk.com)

**Proofreading by:** David Selden

**Transcriptions by:** Kajsa Antonsson, Brandon Farnsworth, Anna Jakobsson, Vanessa Massera,  
Lexi Mendoza, Ragnheiður Ragnars

**Produced** as part of the *Discussing Diversity* exchange project supported by the Nordic Council of  
Ministers and the Ministère des Relations internationales et de la Francophonie du Québec.

**Project steering group:** Brandon Farnsworth, Vanessa Massera, Anna Jakobsson, Thorbjørn Tønder  
Hansen, Sandeep Bhagwati, Aida Aoun

**Special thanks** goes to Torunn Forland, Konstmusiksystrar and to the Zurich University of the Arts for  
their support.

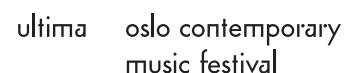
**This publication is supported by**

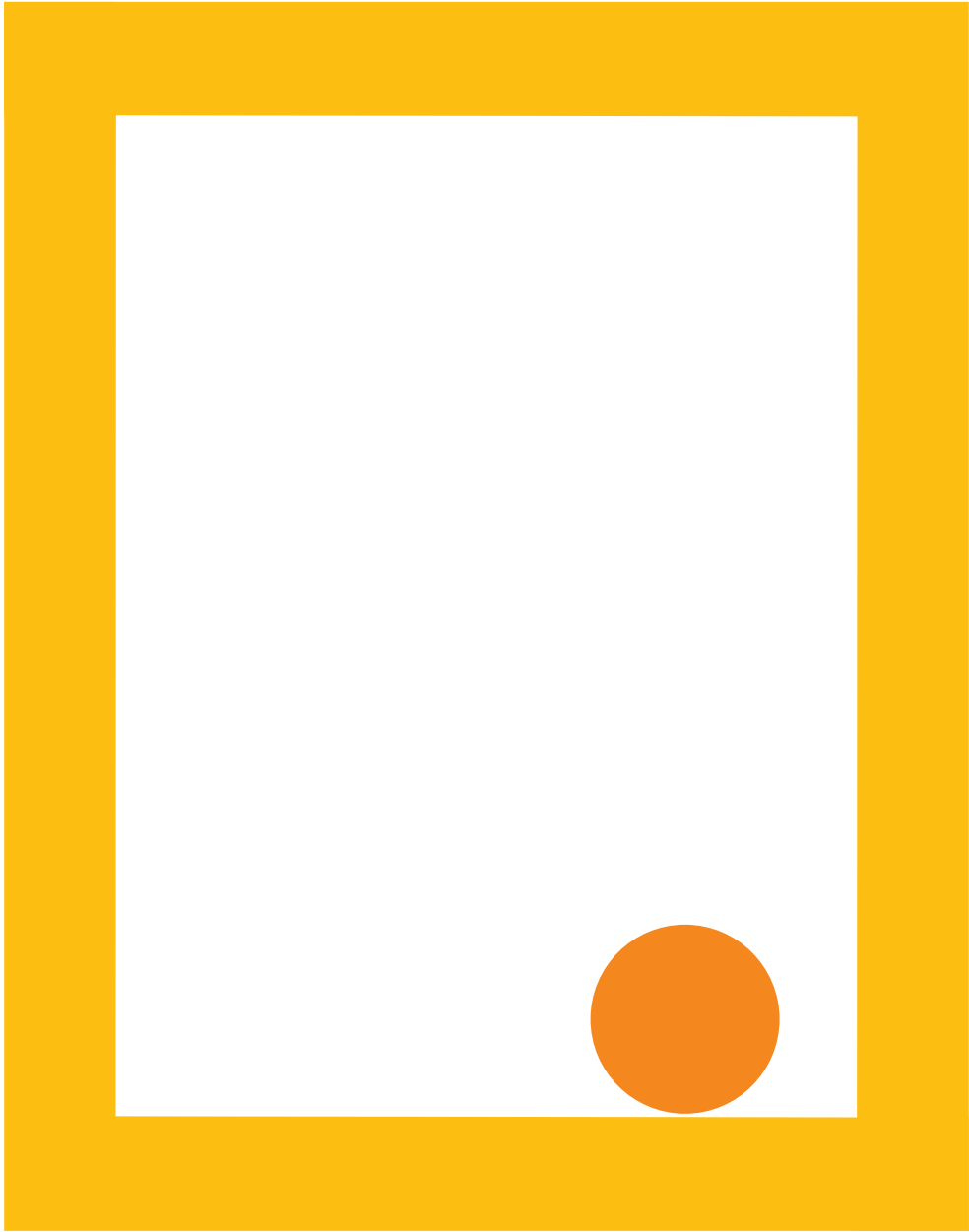
Nordic Council of Ministers

Ministère des Relations internationales et de la Francophonie du Québec

Ultima Oslo Contemporary Music Festival

Société de musique contemporaine du Québec





1. Front matter
2. Introduction to the Second Edition
3. Introduction to the First Edition

## **FESTIVALS**

4. **Thorbjørn Tønder Hansen (Ultima Festival) + FOLLOWUP 20**  
interviewed by Brandon Farnsworth
5. **Tanja Orning (Norwegian Academy of Music) 30**  
interviewed by Brandon Farnsworth
6. **Astrid Kvalbein (Norwegian Academy of Music) 40**  
interviewed by Brandon Farnsworth
7. **Jennifer Torrence (Norwegian Academy of Music) 48**  
interviewed by Brandon Farnsworth
8. **Sandeep Bhagwati (Concordia University Montreal) 54**  
interviewed by Brandon Farnsworth
9. **Alain Mongeau (MUTEK) 60**  
interviewed by Brandon Farnsworth
10. **Peter Meanwell and Tine Rude  
(Borealis – a festival for experimental music) 68**  
interviewed by Brandon Farnsworth
11. **Merja Hottinen (Music Finland) 74**  
interviewed by Brandon Farnsworth
12. **Anne Margvardsen and Anna Berit Asp Christensen  
(SPOR Festival) 82**  
interviewed by Brandon Farnsworth

## **NETWORKS**


13. Collective Interview with **Ung Nordisk Musik + FOLLOWUP 92**  
by Kajsa Antonsson
14. **Marta Forsberg and Adele Kosman (Konstmusiksystrar)  
+ FOLLOWUP 108**  
interviewed by Anna Jakobson
15. **Pauline Hogstrand (Damkapellet) 116**  
interviewed by Anna Jakobson

16. **Marcela Lucatelli (SKLASH+) 122**  
interviewed by Anna Jakobsson
17. **Anna Xambó (WoNoMute) 130**  
interviewed by Anna Jakobsson
18. **Siri Haugen Holden (Balensekunst) 136**  
interviewed by Vanessa Massera
19. **Terri Hron (Canadian New Music Network) 144**  
interviewed by Anna Jakobsson

## INSTITUTIONS

20. **Dena Davida (independent curator, Montreal) 152**  
interviewed by Brandon Farnsworth
21. **Barbara Scales (Latitude 45, Canadian Music Centre) 162**  
interviewed by Brandon Farnsworth & Vanessa Massera
22. **Gabriel Dharmoo (artist, Montreal) + FOLLOWUP 168**  
interviewed by Vanessa Massera
23. **Anne Hilde Neset (Kunstnernes Hus) 178**  
interviewed by Brandon Farnsworth
24. **Bjørnar Habbestad (NyMusikk) 186**  
interviewed by Brandon Farnsworth
25. **Fredrik Andersson (Konserthuset Stockholm) 194**  
interviewed by Anna Jakobsson
26. **Intervention by Jennifer Torrence 200**
27. **Kasper Holten (Det Kongelige Teater) 206**  
interviewed by Anna Jakobsson
28. **Helena Wessman (Royal College of Music, Stockholm) 212**  
interviewed by Anna Jakobsson
29. **Juliana Hodkinson (composer) 218**  
interviewed by Anna Jakobsson
30. **Myriam Boucher (Canadian Electroacoustic Community, Codes d'Accès) + FOLLOWUP 224**  
interviewed by Vanessa Massera





*This book was produced in accordance with all measures by national governments to impede the spread of the novel coronavirus COVID-19.*

*It was produced using the following platforms: Zoom, Box.com, Microsoft Word, Facebook Messenger, Google Docs, Skype, e-mail, telephone calls, Amazon KDP, WordPress and Telegram.*

# INTRODUCTION TO THE SECOND EDITION

Brandon Farnsworth, Anna Jakobsson, Vanessa Massera



## We're still here

We write this introduction just short of one year since the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the cancellation of most live arts festivals and the closure of cultural institutions. It is also the second book we have made together as a team under lockdown. Though updating is always easier than starting something new, we also noticed how our research, Zoom meetings and editing process had developed into a certain rhythm and sense of normality.

Traditionally, the festival format has been used to mark the passage of time, such as through feasts (or fests) celebrating the high holidays, or more recently through the yearly circuit of European music festivals spaced out throughout the calendar year ('are you also coming to Darmstadt?'). Soon will come a period where, for the second time, it is impossible to gather together and mark this passage together as musical communities. This is significant because the repetition of this state of exception is antithetical to the concept of the festival itself. Festivals are always singular, unique experiences, promising continuity but also revitalization and novelty. In 2020 that novelty came from the morbid thrill of seeing established festivals make extraordinary decisions to cancel or alter their events and watching years of work evaporate without a trace. A second year of cancellation transgresses this novelty, transporting us back to the realm of normality, albeit a new and unfamiliar one. As these new patterns continue to inculcate themselves into our lives, what we left behind quickly fades in the rear-view mirror, becoming ever more difficult to 'return to.'


Instead, attention has to be paid to where culture is happening now and cultural institutions need to support the artists and communities creating and consuming it. Just because concert halls are closed does not mean that culture has stopped, it has simply moved to occupy different spaces and taken on new, maybe yet-unrecognizable forms. Live events are guaranteed to return in time, as their ancient track record can attest, but it would be a mistake to confuse our nostalgia and sense of loss for the last world with aversion to the new one.

As Adele Kosman from *Konstmusiksystrar* says in her follow-up interview, livestreaming concerts is simply uninteresting for many people, especially compared to the rich multitude of

artistic practices developed specifically for online formats. In other words, the very modernist idea of wanting to bring 'the concert hall into the comfort of your own home' with as much fidelity as possible seems more to harken back to an era of technological progress and perfect digital representation than to forecast a new one.


Whilst there is a need to spend time mourning ways of life now gone in order to understand what has changed and how we can persist, instead of imagining we are on hold and need to make due with ersatz digital concert halls, the structures themselves have to be redefined. We should concentrate on developing new forms of response-ability towards this newly emerging world, using this caesura as an opportunity for reflecting upon, reconsidering and reorganizing our working methods, programming practices and habituated ways of thinking. Speaking to this, artist Gabriel Dharmoo's text observes that as the pandemic has worn on, artists' willingness to produce and stay busy at any cost have begun to wane. As they come to appreciate slower ways of working, artists have also found an unexpected fissure in institutions reliant on their overproduction, opening doors to new forms both of creating and of resisting.

For their part, many institutions have themselves rediscovered the advantages of response-ability and flexibility to reconfigure themselves to serve the shifting needs of artists and audiences. For instance, when transitioning nyMusikk's OnlyConnect festival to an online-only format, as so many others in 2020 had to do, artistic director Bjørnar Habbestad discussed and developed concepts together with artists for how their ideas (not necessarily their concerts) could be translated into an online format. Because it prioritizes creating musical experiences over arranging concerts, nyMusikk saw an online-only festival as just yet another continuation of its existing activities and ways of working. At MUTEK in Montreal, the festival has been focusing on interrogating its aesthetic and social responsibilities to its audiences, rather than prescribing these in advance. This model has allowed the festival and its programming to grow and evolve, embracing change and diversification as necessary to staying relevant, rather than asking how an audience can be developed for a fixed set of artistic practices.



Six months ago, we closed our first introduction to this book with what was then a cheeky call for art music to seize on this moment to finally sever its toxic relationship with a white, European bourgeois aesthetic. What seemed back then to be a fanciful wish has grown into a reality seemingly just as likely as any other, one that is being modeled and put into practice by, among others, the chorus of figures from Quebec and the Nordic countries we interview in this publication.

We are participating in this paradigm shift through our assertion that these various practices in many different countries and contexts can and should be considered together as a time-shifted community brought together in the following pages. Just as we have preached about alternative modes of musical production during the pandemic, so too is this publication itself a modest attempt to enact an alternative form of gathering and exchange for our artistic community after other forms of gathering have been disrupted. Listening to the insights, challenges and still-unanswered questions raised by the interviews contained in this book, we therefore wish to amplify these voices during this seminal period in music history.



# INTRODUCTION TO THE FIRST EDITION

Brandon Farnsworth, Anna Jakobsson, Vanessa Massera



## Crisis

The following publication was supposed to be a conference at the Ultima Festival launching a year-long series of exchanges and discussions between the the Nordic Countries and Quebec around issues of diversity in contemporary music. As of March, not only did it become clear that such an international event was not going to take place but also that many of the presumptions regarding international travel, freedom to assemble and, perhaps more broadly, the liberal international order that underpinned not just our own project but also the survival of our entire performing arts community, were now open questions without answers.

Thinking and working through this existential dread of the past few months, one of the few thoughts that has eased this crippling anxiety about what the future will bring has been to contextualize our current moment within a slightly broader historical perspective. Much of this anxiety (about the relevance of contemporary music but more broadly about environmental catastrophe, migration crises and right-wing nationalism) predates the novel coronavirus. Rather, as sound artist Brandon LaBelle points out, current feelings and events are themselves unfolding against a larger backdrop of what he calls the 'new norm of crisis,' one of endlessly roiling political and social crises unfolding while we doomscroll through our news feeds. Against such a backdrop, the deeply fundamental questions we wanted to ask about the role of contemporary music in society no longer seemed out of place. Rather, they seemed to be precisely the questions to be asking of ourselves when the crisis of the day finally hit at the very heart of the performing arts, the sharing of an artistic experience in bodily co-presence.

## Curating

The classical music apparatus remains heavily invested in upholding the norms of the classical canon, *Werktreue* and musical quality, doing so through massive investments of both cultural and economic capital that dwarf contemporary music's claim to the continuation of such a tradition. The threats of budget cuts and the support of a culturally conservative wealthy upper class seem to be responsible for the gradual diminishment of the mandate of such institutions to performing a few 'choice cuts' of the concert culture of past centuries. Such a system, as with so much in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, may be a necessary *realpolitik* for the survival of these institutions and


## Musical Diversity

the continued employment of hundreds of orchestral musicians but does so at the expense of any kind of support for the many forms of 21st century concert culture (see for instance the Facebook post by Marcella Lucatelli, on page 128).

It should thus come as no surprise that contemporary music organizers, starved for change, are looking beyond the concert hall, experimenting with new forms of organizing and presenting that are more just, more accessible and which seek to benefit, support and nourish existing communities and artistic practices. Conversely, artists tired of working within a phantasm of 19th century concert culture are understandably taking matters of the presentation and encounter with their work into their own hands, understanding the molding of social contexts as co-constitutive of their artistic expression. To both of these ends, the notion of curatorial practice offers a suitable scaffolding onto which to graft the beginnings of something new, one that is both rooted in the same rich traditions of music-making but nevertheless divested enough from the toxic unresponsiveness of the classical music establishment.

The interviews in this publication contain any number of working definitions of what musical 'diversity' is, or could mean, and how it can be achieved. We see this as an effective means for this field to mark a fundamental and overdue opening, especially in this context of focussing on structural changes, increases in transparency and the participation of more societal groups in determining the future of contemporary music. The twist is naturally that such fundamental transformations *should be* part of any contemporary continuation of New Music, which purports to be a tradition of constant aesthetic change and adaptation, as inscribed in its very name. Somewhere along the line this engine seems to have stalled, leaving us stuck as a community in the doldrums of a narrowly Germanic view of the previous century.

These strongly normative forces seem to still retain the power to suck all the oxygen (and funding) out of the room, leaving an increasingly embattled and angry contemporary music scene either fleeing for the exits towards other art forms, or otherwise seeking to negotiate with the zombies of classical music institutions. Diversity thus means, in the first instance, an acknowledgement of the many musics that exist and flourish today, as well as how forms of political action by artists and




artistic resistance to crisis and hegemonic power have changed and adapted to current conflicts, restraints and possibilities. The focus is less on the unknowable other and instead on divesting from contemporary music's reliance on a musical monoculture.

It is to be expected that a turn towards this murkier horizon, away from a stable, well-defined system, evokes the sense of moving forwards in the dark towards an uncertain future, grasping for how to proceed. In response, this book highlights people and initiatives that are creating new structures and practices on the ground that respond to these criticisms, while also sketching a portion of the local and international connections that constitute the contemporary music community. We do not see this 'mapping' process as passive but rather as itself a contribution towards changing this musical tradition. The kind of 'bringing to speech' that we attempt here thus becomes another step in finding new constellations in which musics can today exist.

Returning to the historic circumstances in which this book has been conceived, where a renewed skepticism of international exchange has swept many post-pandemic discussions in the arts, we believe, to the contrary, that it reaffirms their importance. Connecting with peers who have developed novel solutions to similar concerns across borders allows for mutual growth and the exchange of ideas.

Thus, similar to how COVID-19 has transformed the act of *Taking the Temperature* in previously unknown ways, so too do we see our cheekily-named publication not just as a passive 'snapshot' of several musical institutions and their interconnected struggles, but also as a deliberate act of connection and transformation. We view this current crisis as creating an opening for contemporary music to finally escape its toxic relationship with tradition, quality and a white, European bourgeois aesthetic and embrace the many newly-made musics that exist in this world.



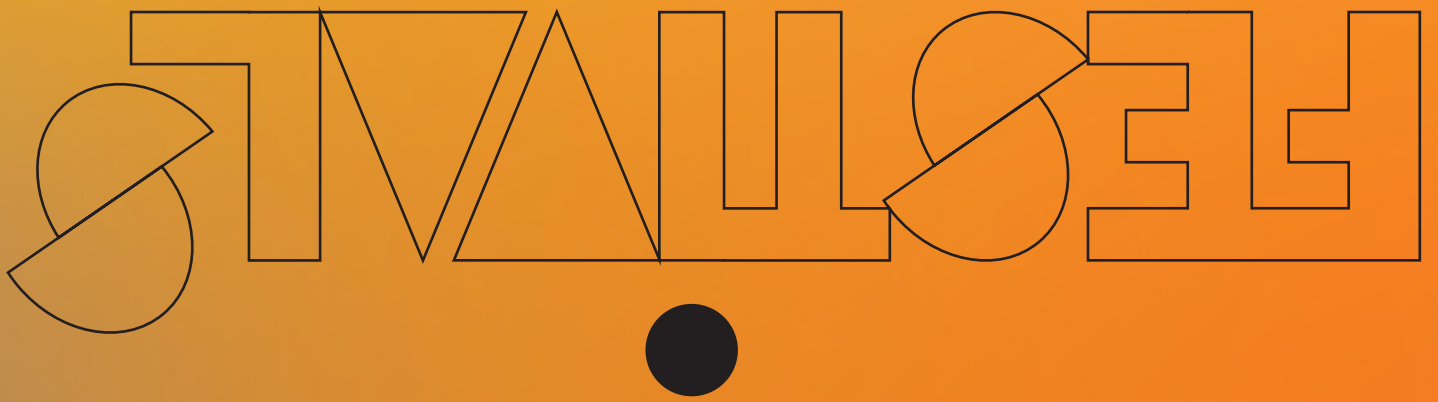
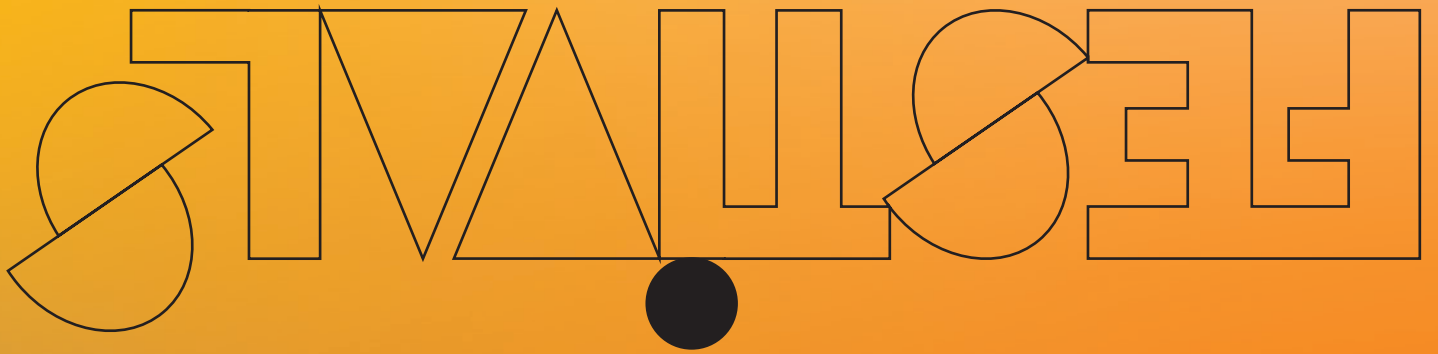
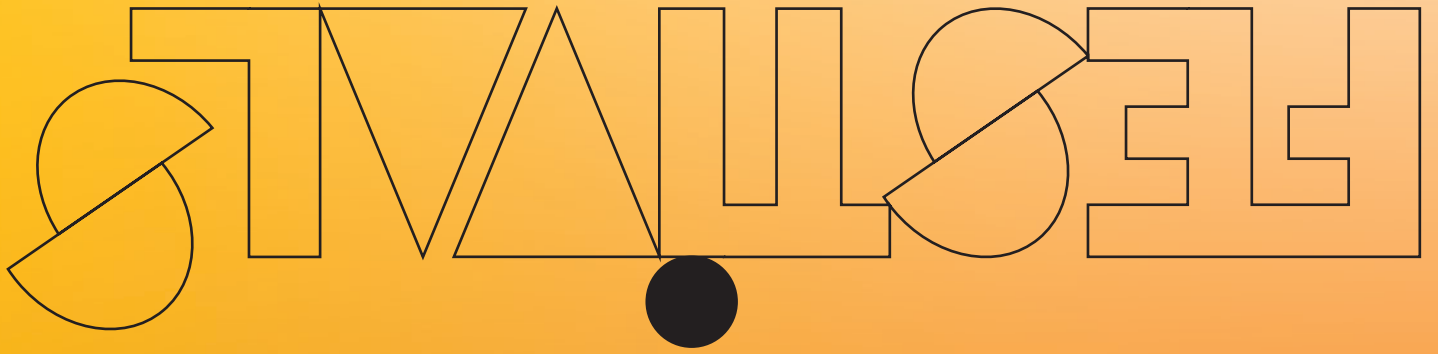
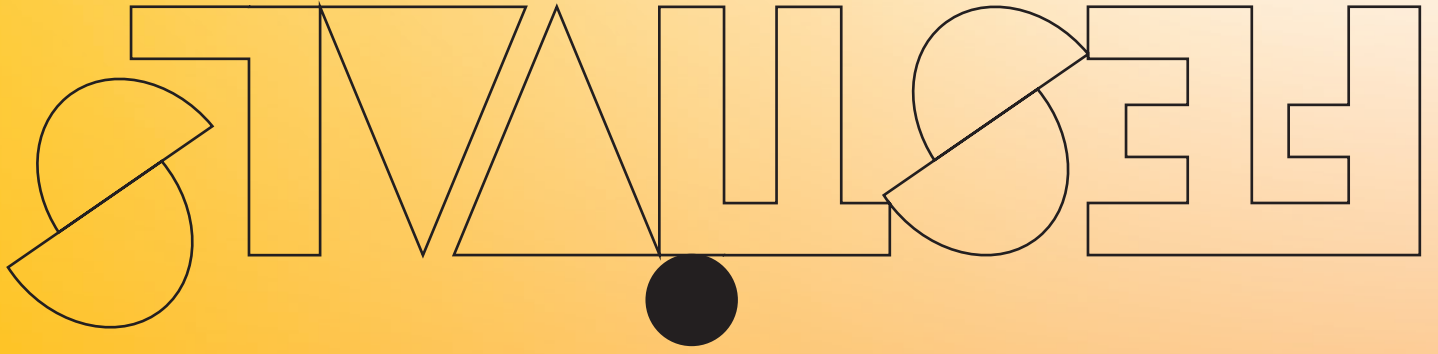
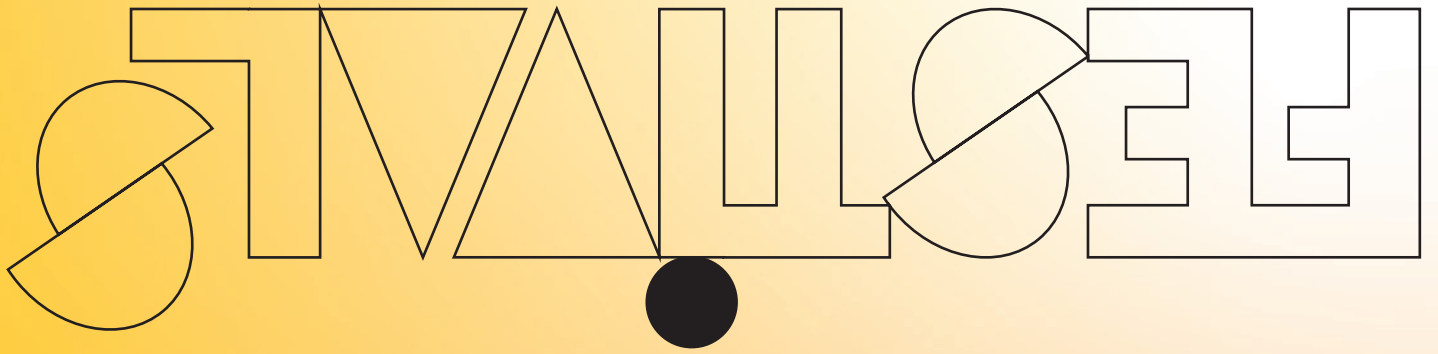
FESTIVAL

FESTIVAL

FESTIVAL

FESTIVAL

FESTIVAL



+FOLLOWUP

# THØRBJORN TØNDER HANSEN

interviewed by **Brandon Farnsworth**

## BIO

---

**Thorbjorn Tønder Hansen** has worked as the leader of the new music/sound art organization SNYK, which arranges the festival G((o))ng Tomorrow in Copenhagen, among others. Tønder Hansen has been based in Norway previously, between 2000-2006, when he worked as manager and producer for Cikada, and as a head producer with Ultima. With his experience in the field of contemporary music and broad international network, he is currently the artistic director of Ultima Oslo Contemporary Music Festival.

## festivals

**Brandon Farnsworth:** Having been involved with Ultima for over 2 decades, how has the festival developed during this time?

**Thorbjørn Tønder Hansen:** I started in the New Music scene in Copenhagen in 1994, with a student job at the Society for the Publication of Danish Music. I was an outsider though. I have played a lot of music, and studied piano as my main instrument in high school, but I chose to study literature and kept my musical interest on the side. My first encounter with the Norwegian scene was in the late 90s with the Copenhagen Jazz House, staging a lot of genre-bending projects.

I started working with Ultima as of 2000 as the head producer. On the Nordic scene, even back then, it had an aura of being a very strongly Nordic festival which existed because major cultural and music institutions in Oslo decided to join forces in the early 90s. The festival would not have been possible without the collaborative structure of the founding members, creating partnerships with everyone from smaller ensembles to the Norwegian Opera, Radio and so forth.

The Norwegian music scene also had a strong curiosity for bending, mixing, and exploring. The festival did not start as something very academic that over time 'opened up,' the openness was already there from the very beginning and remained there in various ways until now.

Geir Johnson, the director at the time, got Ultima involved in many co-productions with big European ensembles and brought in the 'big stars' of the New Music scene, like Henze and Lachenmann, while also keeping this unorthodox side and this will to experiment. He wanted the festival to grow and was trying to make it a kind of Festspiele, together with Nationaltheatret and others. The idea was to merge Ultima with Oslo's CODA dance festival and Nationaltheatret's Ibsen festival, into one Festspiele

which is also why Ultima moved from its original period in October to September. For many reasons, this did not happen and the festivals chose to stay apart but still collaborate.

When Lars Petter Hagen took over from Geir Johnson he began to shape it in his own vision, while also keeping these collaborative and open aspects. Hagen's Ultima was more conceptual, younger but still trying to find a balance between programming interesting new work and the partnerships with the 17 members. The festival became more conceptually refined and also managed to reach out and renew its audience. I took over this legacy in a way, focusing on conceptual curating on the one hand and a strong international network on the other while also creating an unorthodox openness that would interest a larger Ultima audience.

**BF:** Where do your approaches differ?

**TTH:** Artistically speaking, Hagen is probably more interested in a conceptual way of working, be that works themselves are very conceptual, or otherwise works that are brought together in a way that is very conceptual. My approach is to relate Ultima more to current societal and political issues. The first edition focussed on migration and last year's topic, 'Traditions under Pressure', was a political idea combined with a musical idea. The original thought for the 2020 edition was to explore concepts of freedom and their relation to social issues through collaborative artistic processes, such as involving audiences in new ways, working with children, or connecting to groups not necessarily familiar with contemporary music and focusing on a new, more socially-engaged way of curating and making music together.

You could say that there was a shift from a more conceptual approach with Lars Petter Hagen towards something that I would label a politically aware, social approach to programming.

**BF:** How does Ultima's commissioning process work?

**TTH:** On a practical level, commissions come from a number of sources, which mirrors the festival's eclectic structure. We develop some commissions ourselves, starting with ideas that we have about the festival's vision. There are also Norwegian ensembles and theatre companies that are looking for places to premiere commissions where, depending on the project, we sometimes also get involved in shaping them, not to own it but to make them stronger through collaboration. The festival's member institutions can also commission productions for Ultima as a platform, which often starts a dialogue process between them and the festival itself. Finally, we join in on co-productions together with various international networks where Ultima is a stop on a longer European tour.

I try to use this commissioning process to constantly investigate and challenge the notion of what contemporary music is by extending it also to regions or composers that may have a high level of quality, but been underrepresented in Oslo, or in the contemporary music scene internationally. This involves expanding the definition of contemporary music in terms of who are involved, and who could be involved, without limiting ourselves to a historical notion of what contemporary music is. When it works, it becomes a dialogue about what contemporary music is and can be.

**BF:** I understand you have been doing a lot of work on the administrative level around diversification that is not so visible from the outside.

**TTH:** This is an internal process and is slowly coming together.

We have had many discussions about what is represented on stage and diversifying that. That is

It is not possible to truly diversify our festival if we do not take what I call a 360-degree view on diversifying our work culture and internal working processes.

## festivals

one aspect, but it is not possible to truly diversify our festival if we do not take what I call a 360-degree view on diversifying our work culture and internal working processes. The stage is one part but we also are looking at the audience, the temporary festival staff who help in the short term, the permanent staff working in the office year-round and the board as well.

I have been working quite a bit with the staff, having open discussions about diversifying the festival over time and figuring out what exactly what that means when working in the office, commissioning projects, or designing audience development programs. Gender is one aspect but our focus is really on the festival's diversity from an intersectional perspective. This all must be rooted in an idea of contemporary music that, for me, is about searching for new and yet-unheard sounds. Translating this idea into how to work today is how we can break new ground by diversifying the festival, while still keeping the spirit of the musical avant-garde with us. While some argue that musical quality will decline or that the festival will become too broad, I argue, on the contrary, that if any institution should be doing this, it should be contemporary music which has a legacy of change.

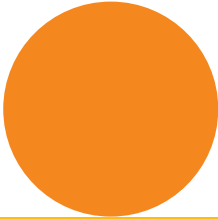
On a practical level, this has meant looking for volunteers from different cultural backgrounds and connecting to new networks of people interested in culture. We started a project last year with TrAP [Transcultural Arts Production], who works with various groups in Oslo, giving them a way into cultural institutions that can otherwise be seen as fortresses of white, male privilege. Ultima recently nominated a theater director from a diverse cultural background to our board, and are applying to the arts council for a program called the Aspirational Scheme (*Aspirantordningen*), where we can apply to hire someone from a different ethnic, cultural, or linguistic background to work for the festival for a year.

**BF: Is the concept of experimentation itself not also normative and associated with a particular aesthetic?**

**TTH:** This idea of what is experimental and what is contemporary music is related to a normative legacy of the academic musical tradition that formed after WWII, one that is also very European and very white. Ultima has seen itself since it started as on the outskirts, away from the centre, at least from a European perspective. This has led to the view that it is possible to be a bit more open, more unorthodox and that we do not have to be so worried about relating to tradition. While this can also be a normative idea in itself, there exists an openness among staff and among the audience, meaning that experimentation to us is also experimentation with the format of a contemporary music festival.

**BF: How do Ultima's international connections relate to a larger strategic vision?**

**TTH:** 'How' we connect is very important to me. Rather than large international co-productions, the focus should be instead on building networks that share common visions for how we can work together. Sounds Now is an example of this. It is a 4 year EU-funded project with 8 other partners in Europe about diversifying the contemporary music scene. Artistic works are, of course, a central part in this network but an equally important part is more process-based work, like curatorial labs in a number of partner cities. With Sounds Now we have not defined the number of fixed artistic productions that we are looking to disseminate or co-produce but rather we are interested in creating a context for development. We reach out to local scenes to see who is interested in curating, show that there is a context and future for curating in music and offer an international platform for discussing curation in relation to diversification. We are also establishing a system with mentors from all over the world where they can give inputs, both to prospective curators but also to those of us running the network.



It is therefore not only about us, the privileged class of festival directors, thinking how to make change but rather about bringing change into our own understanding and our own institutions. Of course there are lots of challenges there that we need to overcome, but I find this process much more interesting than just putting some Euros into a co-production.

**BF:** Talking about these debates around curatorial practice, how do you understand your own role within Ultima?

**TTH:** I reflect on this every day, because this question is really challenging my own practice. Coming in and leading a major European New Music festival as myself, the first non-composer, is already a kind of outsider narrative about my role. Coming in with a very open, social, collaborative approach to curating is also important for me, as I do not have the sense of being the patriarch. Many curators talk about 'my festival,' 'my biennale,' as if it was theirs, implying a strong patriarchal normativity. I try not to do that, talking either about 'our festival' or seeing it as a collaboration, rather than looking at it as a

hierarchical enterprise. In that sense, I do not have any hierarchical ambition of identifying it as 'my' festival. Some people think this can be a weakness, which is where the ambiguity can come in. Should I be standing more in the forefront, being more clear about my vision for the festival? I would rather be doing something else. It is not because I lack self-confidence but rather because I would like take this collaborative approach. This is also the legacy of Ultima, with all these member institutions that form the heart of the festival. Of course I still have to make many practical and financial decisions about the festival but I try to really keep the festival going as much as possible through dialogue, taking decisions together.

The curator as a strong individual at the top of the pyramid is something that honestly does not really interest me, especially in the New Music scene where this idea of the individual is already very strong. I love curating and running a festival and I am happy to take the overall responsibility but curating is more interesting to do in dialogue. Sometimes of course I am a control freak and need things to be done my

Experimentation to us  
is also experimentation  
with the format of  
a contemporary  
music festival.



## festivals

way but I try to challenge myself there also as much as I can!

**BF:** Your festival is a collaboration between 18 cultural institutions. How do the very conservative approaches of particularly the opera and the symphony relate to the progressive goals of the festival?

**TTH:** Coming from Copenhagen, it was remarkable to me that these big national institutions have voluntarily agreed to take part in a contemporary music festival and do so every year. Of course the history of the relationship between Ultima and these institutions is full of what you can call in German a Streitkultur. Sometimes the Opera and the Philharmonic have wanted to put in productions that I did not think would fit with our definition of contemporary music but there is a legacy of open discussion that is important to not destroy by being too critical but by finding this balance. This is very much about diplomacy, in the best sense of the word.

**BF:** What impact has the pandemic had on your festival so far? What changes might you keep in the future?

This heightened awareness of the ethics of programming is something I want to bring into the festival moving forward.

**TTH:** Since the beginning of March, we have been through a number of phases with this years' festival. The first phase was thinking that we needed to cancel everything but also that we had an ethical duty to to secure artists' financial situations. This heightened awareness of the ethics of programming is something I want to bring into the festival moving forward.

The next phase was thinking we needed to go all-digital. The question was whether people would be interested in sitting at home and experiencing an art form that is focused on being experienced live. We wondered if there might be an inherent conservatism there especially in a festival ostensibly meant to challenge and experiment. To this end, we have had many meetings with video producers, thinking of ways to do the festival that are more than just a single camera and microphone streaming live.

The third phase of our pandemic awareness had been to see that society is slowly opening up again and concerts are slowly being allowed to take place under certain restrictions, which is maybe where we need to focus now after so many purely digital months. The question is then how can we create an interesting live situation with all these restrictions? How can we create an atmosphere of enjoyment in a situation that is so serious? How can we create a live situation where artists feel they are actually communicating to an audience?

Perhaps there will be more phases before we reach September but so far what we are bringing forward with us is a heightened awareness of the ethical situation of how to collaborate with artists, seeing this chain of relationships and being very aware of its vulnerability. The most positive aspect has been the willingness of all our partners, both institutions and artists, to find new solutions. This stronger social awareness is something I hope we can continue to nurture in the future.

The curator as a strong individual



at the top of the pyramid is something that

honestly does not really interest me,

especially in the New Music scene where this

idea of the individual is already very strong.

---

FOLLOW UP SECOND EDITION

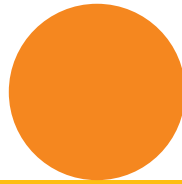
with Thorbjørn Tønder Hansen by Brandon Farnsworth

**Thorbjørn Tønder Hansen:** In light of COVID-19 we have changed our thinking around creating an international festival as we cannot meet physically and develop projects the way we usually do. As we saw with last years' festival, we have to become more aware that projects with an international reach are possible without always having to meet and travel beforehand. We managed to do several projects like that, becoming more flexible in how we produce in the process. This does not mean we transformed to a digital-forward approach—we chose not to livestream concerts, holding on instead to physical formats while seeing how we could prepare them at a distance. When we start travelling again, we can use these lessons on remote preproduction as a way of travelling less, thereby also reducing our environmental impact. This also means learning that even if we cannot meet in person, it is still possible to start to develop ideas together.

Of course, what last year's festival lacked was any kind of social space. Ten minutes after the opening concert, the hall was empty. We stood there and slowly realized what it meant to not be able to gather afterwards, to talk with people, or have a drink. One of the basic functions of any festival, not only Ultima, is the social space that is offered to artists and audiences to interact, discuss, learn and listen together, all of which was sorely missing this year.

My hope for the future is that we figure out how to strengthen this unique social space of the physical concert format on the one hand, while on the other use digital technology to cut down on unnecessary travel, also finding more sophisticated ways of producing and presenting.

## festivals



One of the basic functions of any festival, not only Ultima, is the social space that is offered to artists and audiences to interact, discuss, learn and listen together



# TANJA ORNING

interviewed by Brandon Farnsworth

## BIO

---

**Tanja Orning** is a musician, researcher and educator active in the fields of contemporary and experimental music. Educated in Oslo, in London with William Pleeth and at Indiana University with János Starker (as a Fulbright Research Fellow), she held the position as a co-principal cellist in the Stavanger Symphony Orchestra for 5 years until she left for Oslo in order to realise a number of projects as a performer, improviser and composer in ensembles such as *asamisimasa* (Norwegian Grammy 2012 and 2015), *Kyberia*, *Ametri* quartet, *Christian Wallumrød Ensemble* and *Boa* trio. Orning has commissioned and premiered approx. 120 new works by composers in Norway and abroad, including *Natasha Barrett*, *Maja Ratkje*, *Simon Steen-Andersen* and *Mathias Spahlinger*. She has performed at festivals such as *Darmstadt*, *Donaueschingen*, *Huddersfield*, *Ultima*, *Ultraschall*, *Wien Modern*, *Taktlos* (Zurich), *Other Minds* (San Fransisco) and *Portland Jazz Festival*. She earned her PhD at the Norwegian Academy of Music in contemporary performance practice (2014) and holds the position of Associate Professor at the Norwegian Academy, besides being an active performer.

## festivals

**Brandon Farnsworth:** How has the Oslo music scene changed and developed over the time that you have been involved with it?

**Tanja Orning:** After an absence of 8 years, I came back to Oslo in 2000 with *Navigations*, a conceptual multimedia project in a duo called Kyberia together with violinist Victoria Johnson. We commissioned 20 short pieces from composers in contemporary and popular music, the artist Randy Naylor made a video and three different designers created spectacular dresses for us. The dresses were made of a reflective material donated by 3M, so that the video could be projected on us while performing. We traveled around Norway and abroad quite a lot with this project, also recording it on CD. This was my entry to the Oslo scene in a way, as I left my orchestra job in Stavanger to do this project. In the 20 years since, I have been working with a range of experimental projects in Oslo. *asimisimasa* has been my main group but I have had several other collaborations and solo projects as well.

When I came to Oslo the new music scene in the 2000s was very centered around NyMusikk and the Ultima festival, a lot of which was starting to happen in a club called Blå [ed.: Blue]. The experimental improvisation scene was also very strong in Oslo, and there were a lot of collaborations between musicians from different genres.

NyMusikk was traditionally run by composers and notated scores played by ensembles were the dominant practice. When Lars Petter Hagen, and then Øyvind Torvund, came into NyMusikk they changed the scene a lot. Øyvind Torvund was really interested in different kinds of music and genres, so he worked with juxtapositions, making concerts with three events the same night, which was quite new. Lars Petter Hagen was more conceptual, leaning towards both visual arts, performance and theater, focusing more on cross-disciplinary projects. Another important development has been the popping up

of amazing musicians and ensembles concentrating on new music. In the early 2000s, there were only few independent ensembles. There was NyMusikk's *Cikada*, the only state-funded new music ensemble, which Lars Petter Hagen subsequently separated from NyMusikk. Interesting ensembles like *Poing*, *asimisimasa* and *Spunk* emerged as well as *Ensemble Ernst*, which is the Oslo Sinfonietta of my generation; *NEON* and *Aksiom* are the ensembles of the following generation.

I would say in general that the whole music scene has become very collaborative. There are strong musicians entering the scene and also becoming more creative with both composing and improvising. There are many more cross-disciplinary projects happening, and more links between popular music and art music. There are also more collaborations with improvised music, which you do not see as much in Germany, for instance. The music scene is much richer, there is more of a multiplicity of people and practices, composers and performers than there have been before.

**BF:** How do you see the approach of Thorbjørn Tønder Hansen at the Ultima Festival in relation to his predecessor, Lars Petter Hagen?

**TO:** Lars Petter Hagen was the first director who went very strongly in the direction of curating. The new music field was really used to having an ongoing dialogue with Geir Johnson (Hagen's predecessor) but Lars Petter Hagen's curatorial approach was more personal. He was not so dialogic and was more decisive about what he wanted and not least about what he did not want. Some of Ultima's partners also did not play every year, partly because he wanted more artistic control over the programming. The result was that it opened up the whole contemporary music field in a different way. He really has an artistic talent for curating, which probably comes from both his job as a composer and from his knowledge from constantly listening, reading and traveling. He also

## festivals

takes a lot of chances, it seems he wants something to be at stake in his curating. This direction was not necessarily easy for the performers, because it was very difficult to get their own projects into the festival, as he wanted strong artistic control over what he curated.

My impression is that Hagen is not so fond of overarching themes or concepts, he does not want to explain the art, he thinks that these connections can be invisible and that the programs' quality should be experienced through the music and events themselves. He wants to make these invisible connections and for people to have trust in him. Whereas, of course, traditionally in contemporary music, it is often about this overarching conceptual narrative and these fat program books like you see in festivals like Donaueschingen, where the composers explain their works. Hagen's approach in a way gives much more power to the event itself rather than feeding this theoretical track.

Thorbjørn Tønder Hansen is a different type, not a composer, not a musician, but a concert organizer with extensive experience in both Oslo and Copenhagen. His curating seems to be based to a greater extent on values and on paying attention to equality in terms of gender and nationality. He is trying to bring both societal and political relevance into the festival, and addressing the Eurocentrism of how we curate. For example, the first festival theme was 'Migration,' and the second was 'Tradition under Pressure.'

His approach is more content-driven. These big themes he addresses have opened up the festival to different kinds of projects, like *Where We Lost Our Shadows* (2019) by Du Yun, with Ali Sethi and Khaled Jarrar about the refugee crisis; last year's opening concert, *Lyden av Arktis* (2019) by Lasse Thoresen; Jennifer Walshe's *TIME TIME TIME* (2019), with Timothy Morton meditating on the stage.

This approach has also been criticized, because

the festival claims to engage with these themes like the migration crisis, climate crisis, then it flies in a whole orchestra [ed.: the Arktisk Filharmoni, based in Tromsø/Bodø] from the north of Norway and Timothy Morton from the other side of the planet, meaning there is a lack of connection between the philosophy and the action. Thoresen's *Lyden av Arktis* has also been criticized for its appropriation of the Sami culture, coming in almost like a caricature, with this big multimedia production reinforcing a lot of clichés about the North. The artistic quality of some of the projects has been questionable but at the same time Tønder Hansen is really trying new things, he is experimenting.

### **BF: Why has the term 'curating' caught on in the field of music?**

**TO:** We have always had curators since the beginning of music, they were the ones deciding what should be on the program and where it will be played. In the past the role itself has maybe been more in the background and, of course, it has also followed more traditional tracks, like the overture, concerto, and symphony model in the classical world.

The term curator has really come from visual art. My research shows though that the term is more used in the contemporary music milieu than in classical music festivals. Most of the people I have interviewed are quite humble in their use of the term, and have difficulties negotiating what it means. Some dislike the spotlight that is put on them for doing this job, because curation for them is about working with the material at hand and being part of the work. Many of my informants do not call themselves artists, but they call what they do artistic work, in the sense that they have this kind of role as a middleman or a collaborator. One informant I interviewed uses the word *Veranstalter* in German to show that it is not about being in the way, but that they want to help, contribute and have this dialogue with artists. The biggest change is that instead of just inviting people to

# In this way, this curatorial shift has changed the creative focus from the performing community to curators and producers.

do their thing, now the curator has a more active role, is more involved in site-specificity, collaborations and several links in the production-performance chain.

**BF:** Do you see any differences between artists who are thinking about how to contextualize the work and the same being done by programmers?

**TO:** The artist-curators who I have interviewed all expressed that their curating is an extension of what they do as artists. Curation becomes who you are inviting and, if you have a festival or concert series, also choosing the repertoire, the composers and the venues. As Andreasen and Larsen say, “the curator is not something; the curator does something. There is no ontology of the middleman: she is a performative and exemplary agent, acquiring subjectivity in and by the act of mediation.”<sup>1</sup> This becomes very obvious

when interviewing curating musicians like Patricia Kopatchinskaja, Leif Ove Andsnes or Tora Augestad. They connect their whole artistic worldview to a festival or a concert series. When curation becomes this artistic practice, it is different than if you are one step removed, like when you are a composer, a journalist, or an artistic administrator who curates.

From the other perspective, every festival curator I have interviewed has an immense respect for the artists. For instance, Ruth McKenzie at the Théâtre du Châtelet, and former director of the Holland Festival, says that, “you have to follow the artist: it is not the case that you will always get great art, but it is the case that you will never get great art if you are trying to be the artist yourself. I have to understand that I’m here to serve and not to lead.”<sup>2</sup> For her, it is about the power of art, and her role is to facilitate for the sake of art and the artist.

1. Søren Andreasen and Lars Bang Larsen, “The Middleman: Beginning to Think About Mediation,” in *Curating Subjects*, ed. Paul O’Neil (London: Open Editions, 2007), 109 – 122.

2. Tanja Orning, *Curating Music*, forthcoming.

**BF:** Can you talk a bit more about this negotiation between artists and administrators over the power to control and contextualize performances?

**TO:** We are going to have a concert at Ultima this year with my ensemble asimisimasa. It was very uncertain whether we could have audience or not for the performance due to the pandemic. We were playing with the idea of making a concert that had a few people in the hall but which could also be streamed. We are experiencing so much digitally right now, so we wanted to play with the perception of what is happening live and what is pre-recorded.

The whole time, I have had a very interesting dialogue with Thorbjørn about this: A lot of curatorial practice is, of course, about money and practicalities. In this instance, we would have to rent a whole venue for a day with a video crew, we wanted pyrotechnics that cost around €1500 and then to go into studio to record and mix it. It would have been expensive, but it was such a strong idea by Trond Reinholdtsen, who is making the piece, that everyone wanted to go along with him. Thorbjørn was really into this idea, including a lot of organizational thinking, budgeting, etc. that I really give him kudos for. Suddenly when it emerged that we could have 200 people in the audience, we abandoned the idea, which made him almost disappointed!

Musicians and ensembles who have been working for many years usually come up with their own concepts and ideas. My impression with festival curators is that they also really want to conceive and develop ideas on their own, too. For example, Peter Meanwell is interested in making projects where he is the one bringing people together, and I see Anne Hilde Neset also being interested in this kind of curatorial thinking. It is about creating projects with great respect for the artists' work but bringing them together to create something new, instead of always inviting 'ready-made' productions.

This recreation of works  
again and again, thinking  
in terms of canon, genius,  
all these things are  
stopping classical musicians  
from being artists in our  
contemporary society.

As a curator, working like this can be seen as underestimating artistic ideas, making a judgement about what ideas are valuable enough to be presented. During the last 20 years, the ideas of musicians have been devalued in relation to the curator, who emerges and wants to generate their own ideas. In this way, this curatorial shift has changed the creative focus from the performing community to curators and producers. Of course, this must also be seen in light of art music's struggle for public attention. A 'presentation is everything' approach that works with non-traditional venues and unexpected constellations can easily override the model of 'good musicians who play good music in good acoustics.' While it may seem like a distant past, it is still very often when you experience the greatest moments.

**BF:** I want to talk more now about your work at NMH and reflect on how these issues connect to the next generation of musical talent. What is your vision then for the future of musical education and how does it relate to the issues of curation?

**TO:** We often talk about this dichotomy of artists

or artisan. This is a very worn-out debate, but nevertheless, being a musician in today's society also means having hundreds of years of history to take with you in order to learn the craft and skills of playing instruments as well as the canonic repertoire. Today, there has been a wave of 'entrepreneurship' entering higher music education which, in my opinion, we have not given enough resistance, or thought enough about alternative terms for. I think we rather need to focus on educating *artists* and putting artists back at the core of education.

Gabriel Prokofiev, the founder of nonclassical, has said that the secret weapon of classical music is "that we have so many incredibly trained musicians on a level that many people aren't aware of."<sup>3</sup> But the classical education tradition is so centered around the *Werktreue* ideal of loyalty to the composer's work, and is very much lacking in a creative dimension in performance skills. This recreation of works again and again, thinking in terms of canon, genius, all these things are stopping classical musicians from being artists in our contemporary society.

I have been teaching a contemporary music elective course for 10 years. My vision for education is to do it by educating artists through critical thinking. As classical musicians, you are very much socialized into the flock mentality of an orchestra culture. It starts with playing in orchestras from when you are very young, where there is already a hierarchy, a conductor who is deciding, composers who are not to be meddled with, because this is a taboo, and where improvisation and composition have no natural place. We also need to move away from a soloist thinking—it is a paradox that students are encouraged to concentrate on becoming soloists in their practice rooms in order to get an orchestra job. Students need to have more possibilities to collaborate, to work in different groupings, to be more creative—we should have mandatory composition and improvisation-classes for every discipline.

---

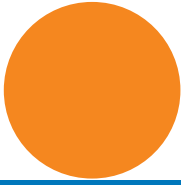
3. Tanja Orning, *Curating Music*, forthcoming.

We need to find out how we can use and translate this burning engagement with music and love for music into our contemporary time. This includes socially-engaged practices, but this does not mean needing to compromise on artistic values. This idea of autonomous art, that music exists in a context-free space of unquestionable value, has to be challenged. All music has context and all music is built upon some ideology or some ideas of people from a certain time. It is pure laziness for classical music to claim this autonomous, free aesthetic space. It is painful to say, because it is something you cannot speak about. It is unsayable. The aesthetic space of art is a place that you cannot actually reach with words. I am not talking about instrumentalizing music, but I am talking about relating to the music in a way that we can also transfer it into today's world.

This critical thinking about what music is and can be is one of the most important things for the future of musical education. This Eurocentric, male canon is not yet really questioned in the classical music field. It is slowly coming in contemporary music like we saw in Darmstadt in 2014 for the first time, but also reading George Lewis' "A Small Act of Curation" [ed.: in *OnCurating Journal* no. 44], it is appalling to see that only two works by non-white Afrodiasporic composers have been performed there, 0.04 percent. That only seven percent of works in Darmstadt were composed by women [ed.: between 1946 and 2014] is also horrible.<sup>4</sup> I am so ashamed that I have been part of a milieu for so many years that has taken so little action towards these issues. It has made me so aware that this identity category of whiteness, white middle-class privileged musician in the Western world is not only the norm, it is also a position. I have been thinking about what the important discourses are for really rethinking our powers, our positions, and how we can promote and help people by programming, not just following all these hidden values and prevailing

---

4. George E. Lewis, "A Small Act of Curation," *OnCurating Journal* 44 (2020), <https://www.on-curating.org/issue-44-reader/a-small-act-of-curation.html#.Xwt3Zy3L1TY>.



It is pure laziness for classical music to claim this autonomous, free aesthetic space. It is painful to say, because it is something you cannot speak about. It is unsayable. The aesthetic space of art is a place that you cannot actually reach with words. I am not talking about instrumentalizing music, but I am talking about relating to the music in a way that we can also transfer it into today's world.



## festivals

discourses that never questioned what quality was.

**BF: What kind of pedagogical strategies does such a shift entail?**

**TO:** Students really need to go out and do different projects, to go perform in different places in society, to program their own small festivals or concert series, commission works, actively practice looking for female composers or non-European composers for example. It is also important for future musicians to be able to write and express themselves. The whole discourse is centered around the idea that if you are a good performer, you do not need anything else than to be good to play. Having curiosity, developing creativity and collaborative skills, following what is happening in the world and combining all this with your musical practice must be encouraged more.

Many performers are challenging the hierarchy of the composer-performer. We no longer have the loyal performer just following instructions from the composer, rather it is a shift in the whole contemporary music world where we see composing-performers and performing-composers, and a multitude of collaborative creative practices, often across art forms.

We must also try to encourage the performance students to question the hierarchies and division of roles between composers and performers that we take for granted by setting up collaborative meetings with composers where they have to be more active, and know more who they are as performers. This is work on their artistic identity again: who are they; what do they want; what do they like; how can they express things to themselves? Being a subject is not always a medium of someone else's ideas.

**BF: How has the pandemic affected your career, your planning, for the next year? What do you think the long-term impacts will be on the field as a whole?**

**TO:** I played my first gig in Kunstnernes Hus, in a duo I have with Helga Myhr, a folk music violinist. It was an amazing experience to play for people again. I felt this atmosphere of people acutely listening with so much concentration. We were hired to play for twenty minutes but we played for forty minutes and could have played for forty more, because the audience just wanted more. That was for me a really strong lesson on why we play music live, how we have this feedback loop with an audience in a room and how important a role the response of the listeners plays in the whole performance.

It is a very vulnerable ecosystem of many stakeholders; performers, composers, funding bodies, production people like sound, lights- and stage people, venues, concert arrangers, booking people and audiences. In a way, we have been very lucky with the Arts Council Norway giving fees to the musicians for cancelled concerts, allowing for postponing things and redefining projects, as well as government compensation for lost income.

Of course, we do not live in a vacuum; a lot of these concert arrangers will also face great difficulties and a lot of them will fold. We already see people struggling to keep up small venues. The experimental, sub-cultural new music scene is also very vulnerable, because it is dependent on a lot of volunteer work that is also prone to this recession. Some people have to take other work and do not have the time to arrange concerts. Lots of festivals are also affected and will probably go bankrupt.

For me, almost everything that I had planned will be postponed. I am also researching and teaching, so for me, it is not a personal financial crisis. A lot of musicians who only perform have been in a big crisis, because it is basically a full stop for a year. We do not know exactly what will happen after this year but people are on the fence; arrangers do not want to book things yet, everyone seems to be waiting and are nervous about what is going to happen. Several

## festivals

countries do not have predictable funding bodies, which means they are dependent on their audiences, but will the audience show up? Right now it seems like people are ready to come but we do not know in the long run.

What I fear is that this situation will result in less 'undergrowth' in the experimental music scene because it is already very vulnerable and economically already weakened over many years.

**BF:** You are working on a series of interviews with music curators. Do you have any insights from those interviews that you want to share in relation to these ideas of curatorship, diversity and contemporary music festivals?

**TO:** All the contemporary music festivals seem to be completely up to date with questions of equality, ethnicity and nationality, to the point where I would say that a lot of curation is happening based on these values, instead of programming and counting the number of female composers and then try to fix it. Like Peter Meanwell, artistic director of the Borealis Festival says, "If I can't find 25 people who were good each year, then I'm really failing my job. If I can't find 25 good people, men, women, non-binary, trans...".<sup>5</sup>

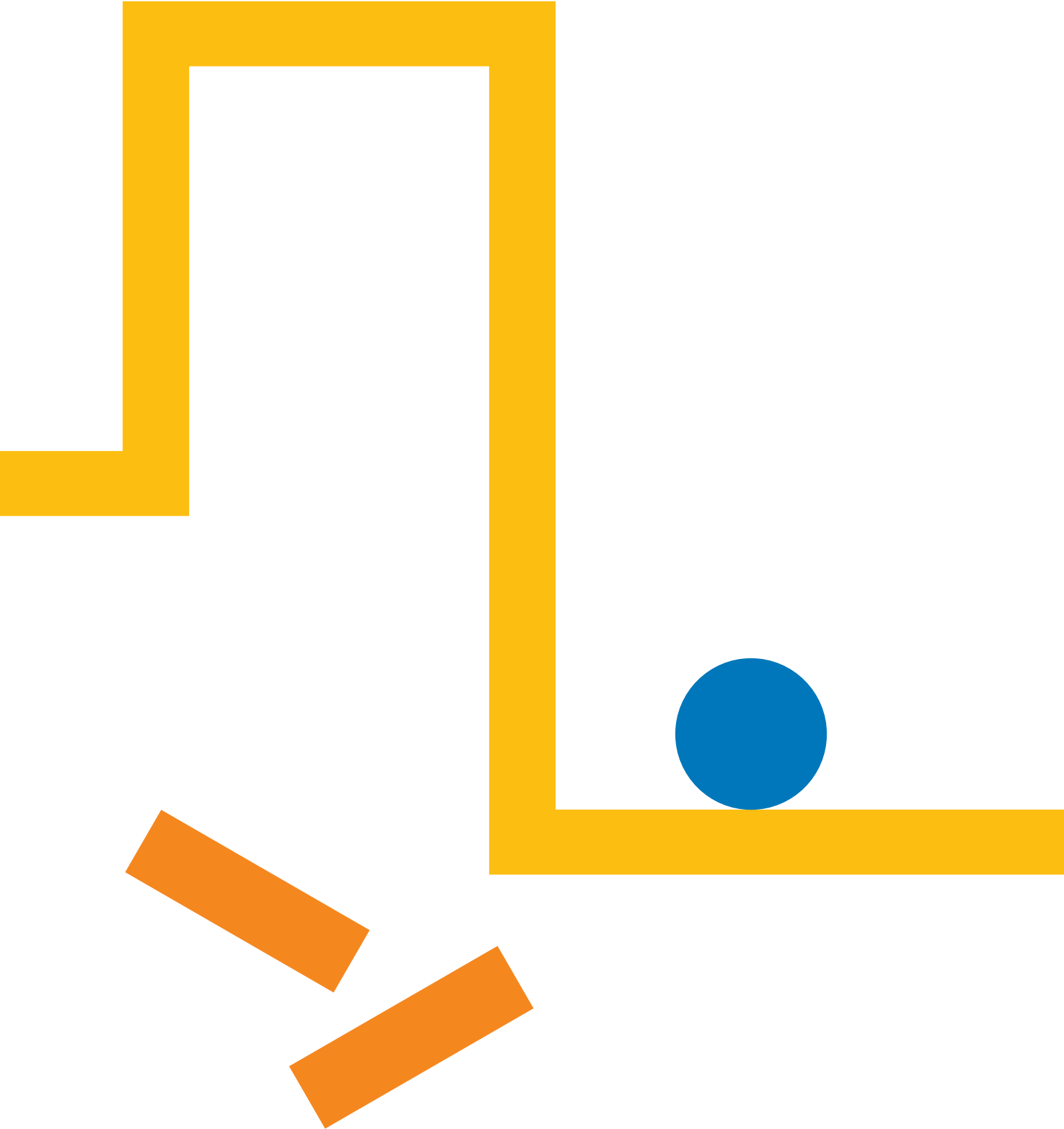
With classical music curators, there often seems to be a lack of consciousness about this, to the point that some are genuinely surprised when I bring it up, because quality is such an honored word that trumps everything else. The question of gender is not seen as relevant to address. Some point to the fact that so many women are playing now but that there were no female composers at the time, which is really sad but is due to social circumstances that they cannot do anything about today. The masterpieces need to be played. The possibility of thinking about contemporary composers being female does not really come up as part of the same question.

---

5. Tanja Orning, *Curating Music*, forthcoming.

There are exceptions though, for instance David Pickard from the BBC Proms, who is really humble regarding areas he does not have extensive knowledge about i.e. contemporary music. The Proms has the policy when commissioning new works, that 50% should be by female composers. He is really cherishing opening his horizons and everything he learns from the contemporary music scene. He sees the importance of not programming contemporary music as this ten minute obligation for people to painstakingly sit through. Rather, he wants to program contemporary pieces that that he is proud of, and to show them properly in the program. I would say this approach is also spreading in the classical concert world but it is slow, especially in music education.

All the contemporary music festivals seem to be completely up to date with questions of equality, ethnicity and nationality, to the point where I would say that a lot of curation is happening based on these values.



# ASTRID KVALBEIN

interviewed by Brandon Farnsworth

## BIO

---

**Astrid Kvalbein** specialises in Norwegian music history from the 1900s to the 2000s. Her PhD thesis was about Pauline Hall (1890-1969) who was a Norwegian composer, music critic and founder of Ny Musikk, the Norwegian section of the International Society for Contemporary Music. Currently, she is conducting research on Norwegian composer Fartein Valen (1897-1952). She is also a freelance writer and singer, with a particular interest in contemporary music.

## festivals

**Brandon Farnsworth:** You wrote your PhD on Pauline Hall and her central position within Oslo's new music community in the 20th century. What were your main findings, and how do they connect with Oslo's new music community today?

**Astrid Kvalbein:** Ny Musikk, the Norwegian section of the International Society for Contemporary Music (ISCM) that Pauline Hall founded, became crucial in the foundation of Ultima. A cosmopolitan at heart, living in Paris in 1913 and in Berlin in 1926–32, Hall wanted Norway to relate to the international music scene more actively. During the 1920's and 1930's nationalist forces were on the rise, which she found to be very dangerous. She preferred to think of music as a tool to connect internationally and saw the ISCM network and festivals as a necessary means to connect to what is happening outside of the distant corners of Europe, in particular the new and the avantgarde. This ideology was still prevalent in the first Ultima programs from the early 1990's.

Pauline Hall was a prominent figure in many ways. She founded Ny Musikk and was the music critic for the daily paper, *Dagbladet*, for about 30 years, as of 1934. She was also exceptional from a gender perspective: she was often the only woman composer on the concert programmes of her day and usually the sole female representative at the general assemblies of the ISCM.

When I started working with my project, I did not want to write about Hall as a story about another neglected female composer but as a powerful person. She founded Ny Musikk and ran it for decades, until 1961. The people that still remembered her talked about her with respect as a feared critic and were often nervous about her judgement. Researching the material, gender of course did make its way to the surface, sometimes in unexpected ways. Hall was in the group of 12 that founded the Society of Norwegian Composers in 1917, four of whom were

women, which was in fact a high percentage for the founding body of that society. It was a surprise for me to see how many active female composers there were in the beginning of the 20th century, although they unfortunately became fewer and fewer.

What I saw though, was that between her birth in 1890 and her death in 1969, being a composer became a profession, which affected women very seriously. In 1917 there were quite a lot of female composers in Norway but they mainly made domestic music. They did not write music in the formats that demanded an education, or access to a symphony orchestra. As composing became increasingly professionalized, the percentage of women composers declined. If you count members of the Society of Norwegian Composers, it has taken a while for the percentage of women to start to rise again, from a little more than ten as late as 2009, to about eighteen in 2019.

Perhaps we would call it a tokenism today, the way Hall was the one who proved that 'women can also do it,' while still working in a system where she was an exception, since the contexts where she took part were largely male dominated. She was exceptional also in regards to her sexuality. It has been a privilege for me to be able to highlight that she was a lesbian because, although Pauline Hall is very much part of Norwegian music history, her sexuality is something that has been treated very discreetly.

**BF:** Do you see the professionalization of the composer's role as part of Pauline Hall's move towards organizing rather than composing?

**AK:** Pauline Hall was versatile and could do more than composing, such as organizing and writing about music. She enjoyed this but it was also hard for her to live from making music. In 1929, she had a successful premier of an orchestra work, the *Verlaine Suite*, which in most narratives about male composers would have been a breakthrough moment. While the

## festivals

work generated a temporary income for Hall, that breakthrough never really happened. Although it is hard to prove directly, it is easy to imagine that her gender could have played a role in that. Since she was not played repeatedly and did not have a rich family to support her, she had to do other things to make money, leading her towards making stage music, for example—although that was less prestigious and also generated less money per performance.

### **BF: What is the connection between Hall's Ny Musikk and the Ultima Festival?**

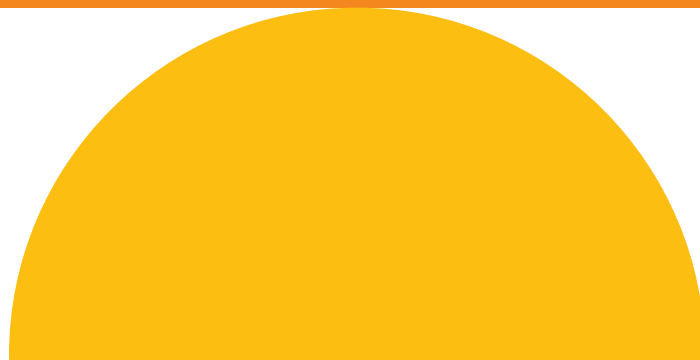
**AK:** The most direct link between Pauline Hall and the Ultima festival is the ISCM World Music Days festival, which she hosted in Oslo in 1953. Ultima was founded when Oslo hosted the World Music Days for the second time back in 1990, and has continued as its own festival since 1991.

### **BF: What directions has the Ultima festival taken in the 30 years since?**

**AK:** In the years after it was first established, Ultima had to fight hard for its right to exist, before eventually getting more stable funding. Organizationally, the festival had a very strong period of expansion after that, with a leadership that was strongly invested in networking, political positioning and serving Norway's cultural scene as a whole. It has been slightly downsized since but musically I think it has become broader. What has kept Ultima so solid over the years is that it has seventeen members who contribute to the production each year. Among them are the Norwegian National Opera and Ballet and the Oslo Philharmonic as well as a range of smaller ensembles for contemporary music.

Ultima has always had to negotiate between how the artistic leadership would like to profile the festival and what the members are willing and able to do. If you look at the festival from this perspective, you can see that a lot has changed. In the early days the focus was on building relationships, more so than fitting in

It has been a privilege for me to be able to highlight that she was a lesbian because, although Pauline Hall is very much part of Norwegian music history, her sexuality is something that has been treated very discreetly.



with the concept of the festival. Ultima in the 1990's considered itself as having to teach the established musical institutions contemporary music, whereas now, with the generations of musicians that are active in the Oslo Philharmonic and other institutions, it is easier to come with more crazy ideas and actually have them do it, including alternative ways to present concerts.

**BF:** How did the festival change when Lars Petter Hagen took it over from Geir Johnson?

**AK:** It is tempting to exaggerate the contrast between the two directors who ran it for the longest time, Geir Johnson, who was active since the beginning in the 1990's, and Lars Peter Hagen, who began in 2009, and took the position of calling himself both a composer and curator. One might say that they represent examples of different logics; Geir Johnson would ask the ensembles and musicians who were performing contemporary music to give concerts with the best music they had to offer. When Lars Peter Hagen took over, many musicians felt that they had to do something that fit with his theme and his idea of what the festival should be as a whole. While it is important to be nuanced here – Geir Johnson has been part of the avant-garde scene in Norway for many years and has initiated a lot more than traditional concerts with modernist music, there was nevertheless a shift in Hagen's approach that triggered some discussion.

One of the core questions was, of course, about quality. You often get these discussions around artists with interesting concepts that are hot and contemporary vs. whether they actually make good music, etc. It is worth asking whether 'concert music' still defines what musical quality is in the end, or whether new forms generate new criteria for quality.

**BF:** Before we go on with the question of quality, how do you see Thorbjørn Tønder Hansen, on his third year with the festival,

Do even contemporary music festivals need to put Beethoven busts on the front of their program, even if perked up in neon pink? What questions does that trigger?

**as fitting in to this history?**

**AK:** Like all of the former directors, Lars Peter Hagen is a composer himself, and his aesthetics probably relate to where his heart lies curatorially. Torbjørn Tønder Hansen is experienced in the contemporary music field but not a composer himself. Time will show whether that is a significant difference. When it comes to issues of gender and diversity for instance, Lars Peter Hagen obviously had to deal with this and did so more systematically than the generation before him. On the other hand, he would eventually turn back and deal with traditions and canonical works and composers, categories that we cannot just dissolve. At Lars Peter Hagen's last festival in 2017, Ultima collaborated with the Oslo Philharmonic and actually made Beethoven the fulcrum of the festival. It coincided nicely with the Philharmonic playing all the symphonies in a row at the same time as the festival was scheduled but it does raise the question: do even contemporary music festivals need to put Beethoven busts on the front of their program, even if perked up in neon pink? What questions does that trigger?

I am excited to see if Thorbjørn Tønder Hansen will be willing to experiment even more in order to make

## festivals

issues of gender and diversity stronger at Ultima. Something like putting Beethoven at the centre is interesting because it links him to newer history but on the other hand it is quite problematic. If I ask myself if Thorbjørn would do the same thing, I am inclined not to think so, because he addresses the public in a different way and I have the impression that he deals even more actively with diversity—judging from the very few festivals so far that he has organized.

On the other hand, I do not think we need a lot of projects that are politically well-intended but risk being musically and artistically banal. At one fairly recent Ultima festival, a large work was staged that involved improvisers and folk musicians from different countries as well as documentary video art. The topic was migration and, among other clips, the film showed dramatic scenes of refugees in life vests desperately trying to get over to Europe. The music somehow served as a harmonizing force, mixing the different folk music elements and spoken stories over long drone-tones in a quite predictable way. It was probably well intentioned but I do not know what that sort of piece does for us or why this had to be at a contemporary music festival as it was more of a world music piece, in my conception. But, of course, the borders between genres are also hard to draw up exactly.

**BF: What would be your vision for a contemporary music festival in Norway in the future?**

**AK:** I want contemporary music to inspire us to think differently, which is why I also want more diversity. I do however want it to be deeply thought through and created by way of artistic work so that it does not become just tokenism. If we want music to be a driving force to change society—in addition to other purposes, such as sensuous play and pleasure—we need it to trigger something else than what we get from the news. I believe there is a risk that socially and politically inspired art becomes banal but also

hard to criticize, because it is so well intentioned. If art is going to help us deal with current topics, it has to find original ways to do so.

What I would always like to see—and hear—are musical works, productions and concerts that challenge the categories we carry with us, both culturally and structurally, and not only relating to gender and ethnicity. The division between composer and performer, for instance, often works as a conservative force and, most concretely, in collaborations with the larger music institutions.

**BF: You have mentioned that Ultima saw its role in the 1990s as teaching its larger members about contemporary music. Institutions like opera houses and philharmonic orchestras are, however, deeply materially invested in the systems you criticize in a number of ways. Can such a festival maintain such relationships, while remaining a force for change?**

**AK:** The relationships can and should be maintained but, of course, you might encounter a lot of challenges once you approach those institutions. First, they have to fill their hall and sell tickets, so they need to offer something that people will recognize so that they come. Because of this, there is a lot of modernist repertoire that has not been performed in Oslo yet, particularly at the opera. It is tempting to say that we should just start there and start playing the operas that have been written for big stages by Bernd Alois Zimmerman, Kaija Saariaho or Olga Neuwirth. But practically speaking, they would not dare to do it because of their finances.

Then the institutions also need to set up productions that the performers working there can do, meaning that if you are going to stage a huge production with an opera house, it has to be recognizable for the orchestra members and for the singers. The same goes for the orchestras as well—they of course prefer

If you really want the musicians to do something radically different, then it requires a different working process.



Orchestras that play old works every week repeat what quality is, what is classic, what is canonized, what is still worth listening to.

to play something that is well written in the format that they usually work within. If you need a whole symphony orchestra in order for your art to actually take place, that might restrict artistic freedom. To increase diversity, or experimentation, we would perhaps need to be able to experiment with the orchestra in the same way as with smaller ensembles, first bringing a sketch, improvising, being in dialogue with specific performers and so on. The big institutions are not really set up for that. The productions are usually huge, expensive and planned very far ahead, all of which is restricting, meaning it is much easier to have a composer who can deliver a score on a given date. If you really want the musicians to do something radically different, then it requires a different working process.

At the same time, by reproducing certain kinds of works, the performing arts institutions define what we think of as good music. Orchestras that play old works every week repeat what quality is, what is classic, what is canonized, what is still worth listening to. This has to do with what Lars Peter Hagen would perhaps call institutionally defined quality. I believe it is the composers' and musicians' job to keep thinking in different categories from the established formats, to actively use them to challenge us and our concepts of quality.

**BF:** As the concept of artistic quality becomes harder to define, how do you see the role of artistic directors changing?

**AK:** If we want to enhance artistic diversity, concepts of quality inevitably have to be diverse as well. If, for instance, you want to bring in music from non-Western cultures, then the question becomes who is qualified enough to judge what a good production from those other contexts is. If you do not know the codes of a particular musical idiom, it becomes a challenge.

Having to make artistic decisions from the position as a festival director, eventually one will have to follow

Historians should not just leave this issue of diversity to programmers of contemporary music, rather we should also examine the archives, as we have been doing with female composers.

## festivals

some gut feelings about what the better decision is. The challenge for festival directors then becomes to take a self-critical approach towards how they categorize and judge quality, which is fundamental to diversifying what 'we' let in. At the same time, they must question who 'we' are by re-evaluating all these small decisions, everyday thoughts, reactions, prejudices and gut feelings that constitute such a community in the first place. When it comes to judging quality, a colleague of mine once wrote an essay asking: why can't the critic be experimental as well? Can writing about music and its quality also take experimental forms? It would really challenge the categories if the way we talk about music could also be a way of experimenting with it too.

**BF:** If this is the challenge for festival directors and critics, how do you see your role?

**AK:** As a music critic for many years I have seen my role, to a great extent, as fighting for space to write about classical and contemporary music at all, whether in daily papers, magazines or journals. With the rapidly changing media situation it has been challenging but digitalization has, of course, also opened up new formats in which to discuss contemporary music. As a historian, I like to think that part of my job is to highlight the diversity of the past. A colleague of mine recently did a story about neglected black composers in American history inspired by the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, for instance. Historians should not just leave this issue of diversity to programmers of contemporary music, rather we should also examine the archives, as we have been doing with female composers. My dream is that symphony orchestras would then be inspired to put old neglected works on their programs, too. The way we perform history, focusing on Western canons and genius figures, is still so strongly engrained that it will also take some effort to revise and to tell new stories.

# JENNIFER TORRENCE

interviewed by Brandon Farnsworth

## BIO

**Jennifer Torrence** (1986, Atlanta, USA) is an Oslo-based percussionist and performer. She is currently an artistic researcher at the Norwegian Academy of Music where she also lectures and teaches privately. Her work investigates, for example, the body, precariousness, queerness, and collective making in experimental music performance. In addition to solo performing, she is a member of Pinquins (Norway) and is the former principle percussionist of the Arctic Philharmonic and Sinfonietta (Norway). She is a founding member of Queer Percussion Research Group and a member of Percussive Arts Society New Music/Research Committee. She is a curator for the Ny Musikk Periferien Series (Oslo), and New Domesticity (Oslo). Jennifer Torrence holds her PhD in Artistic Research from the Norwegian Academy of Music. She previously studied at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music, Guildhall School of Music and Drama, and University of California San Diego. She was a Fulbright Scholar to the United Kingdom.

## festivals

**Brandon Farnsworth:** Norwegian contemporary music festivals are working on diversifying their programming. How are you experiencing this shift?

**Jennifer Torrence:** The two main festivals in Norway, Borealis and Ultima, have very different approaches. Borealis opens up the category of contemporary music to include other genres, like DJs, forms of experimental pop, etc. Recently Ultima has brought in traditional folk musics. Ultima is also thematically curated, often along explicitly political lines, such as in 2019 which addressed both traditional music and climate change. This combination is important: as climate change progresses it will effect communities, particularly communities of color, unevenly and threatens ways of living and ways of making music. I appreciate these topics being brought forward together but I did not feel that this was totally successful. It was not clear to me what Ultima (or any) festival is ready to actually do about the climate disaster and its effect on communities of colour all over the world beyond aestheticizing it. It seems like it is a hard step for a festival to actually take. Of course they are great concerts but there is a kind of gap there between the curatorial idea and social action.

For instance, there was a piece by Lasse Thoresen called *Lyden av Arktis* (2019) about the arctic melting, that also integrated indigenous music from the Sámi culture. At one point, the percussionist, wearing a suit, marched around the orchestra with an indigenous hand drum and pretended to be a shaman. In any other context people would have been up in arms about this kind of cultural appropriation. To suggest the symphony orchestra can amplify folk traditions that are under pressure does not come without risk – the pressure also comes from the orchestra that is taking and benefiting from music without acknowledging these musics' role in classical music history, or integrating these communities as equals into the field. This appropriation and exploitation is

something that we have not fully reckoned with yet. There is also the history of the treatment of the Sámi people in Norway and there is a desperate feeling among curators and musicians not knowing what to do about this, which we also feel now with the Black Lives Matter protests. It is a feeling that we only ever make mistakes and a kind of lazy desperation.

There have been many situations where it really hurts the project when it feels like we are just again capitalizing on these areas that we are trying to diversify. Are we really being inclusive, or are we just looking for new areas to conquer?

**BF:** Do people feel within the Norwegian scene that they are being pushed out because of these diversity initiatives?

**JT:** People in the field can easily grow frustrated with the gatekeeper relation that the artistic leader of a festival has – this is of course a tension no matter what city or country that festival is in. I have not heard anyone say that they are frustrated that more people of colour, women, and other genres are coming into the festivals. Frustrations around genre can be a question of taste, where people would rather hear instrumental modernist pieces, as opposed to traditional folk music or DJs or performative pieces, but I think in part this has to do with taste rather than a fear of losing opportunities. I do think the question of genre and what is “included” in contemporary music will continue to open up. I hope so.

**BF:** What contrast do you see between Thorbjørn Tønder Hansen's leadership of Ultima and that of his predecessor?

**JT:** When I came to Norway Ultima was collapsing and Lars Petter Hagen came in and saved it. He increased the audience, brought in a lot of young people and used the city in interesting ways. In general, the view is that he did a wonderful thing and he had such an important role. He also had such

## festivals

an edgy aesthetic as a curator, often programming large-scale, spectacular projects and he brought many artists from around the world that were really life changing to see.

Thorbjørn Tønder Hansen has come into a ship that is already well made, so he has a different kind of role in developing the festival. His aesthetic and artistic aim is also very different. He is doing important things on a political and social level. He is much more focused on these aspects at a curatorial level and in terms of including female voices, people of colour, etc.

**BF: What experiences have you had working with artistic directors in general? Are artistic directors in danger of taking over the mediation of your work?**

**JT:** I must say that I have had only positive experiences with festivals. What we as a field in general must be careful about is when diversification becomes the context for pieces. If I was only programmed as a female, queer artist, rather than for what the work is doing and how it fits in a curatorial context, then I would feel this as a kind of erasure that transforms into a tokenistic kind of inclusion. Artists and pieces should be allowed to be artists and pieces as they are, without having to fit in some subcategory like “female composer”, etc. On the other hand, I am part of the Percussive Arts Society International Convention (PASIC) and we are curating an event in 2022 featuring female, non-binary and transgender artists who have contributed to the field of contemporary percussion playing. That is a context where it is very explicitly those people and their identities that we want to showcase on the stage and to hear their works and performances. This has to do with not only inclusion but also with correcting the narrative around who is considered a real contributor in the field of contemporary percussion.

**BF: You collaborated with Trond Reinholdtsen on a piece entitled Institute for Posthuman**

**Performance Practise (2016–2018). Can you talk a bit about the work?**

**JT:** This piece relates to the music theatre tradition after Kagel, where a lot of the meaning of the piece is related to the frame of the Western traditional concert situation: subverting it and turning it around is where its meaning lies. Trond Reinholdtsen is an artist who is constantly working with this tradition and messing with it. For almost all of his pieces, without the fundamental knowledge of the field, a lot of the jokes would not be funny but that does not mean it is less valuable. Rather this institutional critique is also part of the tradition itself and he is continuing it with that kind of work.

**BF: Do you see that criticism as being functional, actually changing things?**

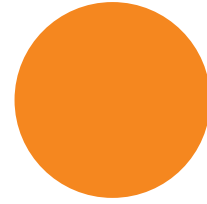
**JT:** What I found compelling with this project is that it purports to criticize this move towards technology as a way of improving music, within the wider context of the faculty of humanities in general are under some sort of attack by technology. Rosi Braidotti and other philosophers are talking about this post-human turn and what happens to humanity and, by extension, the arts and humanities - as we become post-human.

This piece also embraces technology. Almost the entire thing exists on screen. So it is doing both at the same time, criticizing and participating. This kind of thesis/antithesis context is an interesting approach. It is criticizing something, while also participating in that very thing, so there is a reflection happening within the piece itself but also in the field—maybe—without suggesting a solution but just pointing at something that’s there. We want to critique the institution but we also want to be in it, please!

**BF: What has been your most meaningful festival experience so far?**

**JT:** It was at Borealis in 2018. Peter Meanwell is able

You are in an artistic situation



onstage but simultaneously there is also this space



for spontaneous being next to each other in the



audience, during a very condensed time



in a small town- perhaps this is the



strength of working on a



smaller scale.



to, through quite simple strategies, create a sense of community and a situation for actual relationship building. This is not something that happens in just one panel, where you meet someone and have a discussion. Where it really happens is at breakfast at the hotel because everyone at Borealis stays at the same hotel. It is this type of situation that is completely unique. You are in an artistic situation onstage but simultaneously there is also this space for spontaneous being next to each other in the audience, during a very condensed time in a small town- perhaps this is the strength of working on a smaller scale. To me that is the most important thing that a festival can do: to facilitate actual relations to be made organically. Ask him how he does it! I always feel very sad during festivals that are more like pop-in, pop-out experiences, where people just fly in, show their piece, then leave again.

**BF: Why is that aspect of community so central to you?**

**JT:** What we are doing is a social practice and in contemporary music we are all already working in some kind of community. The special thing about a festival is the ability to focus in, get close, feel it – as a group of artists – and then leave again with those experiences. That is the core of it. There are of course artistic aesthetics but it is just relations and what those relations can produce.

**BF: What impact has this pandemic had on your artistic career?**

**JT:** Right now I am in a research project with Ellen Ugelvik and Laurence Crane at NMH, on the topic of precariousness. The pandemic has made it very concrete that the contact with other bodies is itself a risk. Now it is suddenly life-threatening but already before I felt that was an area I wanted to investigate. How do we feel loss of control in this space of transition, transmission and in the moment of touch? I have been thinking of pieces that may temporarily

Rosi Braidotti and other philosophers are talking about this post-human turn and what happens to humanity and, by extension, the arts and humanities - as we become post-human.

## festivals

go extinct, like *c* (2013) by Simon Løffler, where you have to bite a stick that transmits sounds through bone conduction affording you to hear amplified instruments. What audience member is going to bite a stick in a concert hall these days? Wojtek Blecharz and I made a piece called *Soundtouch* (2017) where the audience is blindfolded and lying on the ground. I go and put instruments in their hands and show them how to play them. They are reaching around towards each other, hitting their neighbours' instruments, all these things that are just rituals for coming closer to sound and other bodies but maybe these pieces cannot be done any more.

It is frustrating and also interesting that these cannot be done right now but when they can, wow, what a moment when we can feel that physical proximity in the concert situation again! It will be more important than ever, I think. On the one hand you have pieces that maybe cannot be played for years to come but on the other there is this new dimension of their beauty and importance that opens up. We thought it was just new and novel but suddenly it is not about novelty anymore, which makes the pieces feel even more substantial and urgent.

Another thing that has come up with this situation is an understanding of empathy and community. It seems that as a global community we have collectively had time to reflect on exactly this empathetic muscle that we maybe have not exercised enough. There are already pieces that are encouraging empathetic exchange between audience and performers but I think there will be more works that are really looking for connection, not just aesthetic ideas.

Lastly I am interested in how the Black Lives Matter movement will translate to the Norwegian context. There are so many people coming forward sharing their experiences as victims to explicit and systemic racism, evidence suggests we can no longer say this is only an American problem. In what ways are we thinking holistically within this New Music community

in Oslo and in Norway to heal those relationships? There are very few people of colour who have a place in this New Music community, which does not reflect the actual population of Oslo, where there are so many people of color and ethnicities from all over the world. It is the same all over Europe that these relationships have to be healed and it is the job of those of us who are already 'in' the system to fix it.

**We want to  
critique the  
institution  
but we also  
want to  
be in it,  
please!**

# SANDEEP BHAGWATI

interviewed by Brandon Farnsworth

## BIO

**Sandeep Bhagwati** is a composer, conductor, poet, theatre-maker, and researcher. Born in India, he has lived in several European countries before coming to Montréal in 2006 as a Canada Research Chair in Inter-x Art at Concordia University, where he founded and directs the matralab - a lab for research-creation in performing arts. His compositions and comprovisations, among them several experimental operas and large scale orchestral works, but also many chambers and vocal compositions for musicians of many cultures are performed worldwide by leading performers and at prestigious festivals and venues. He leads ensembles of trans-traditional music in Montréal, Berlin, and Pune and has published widely on transcultural music. He is also a leading researcher and developer of music technologies, especially new score formats that allow musicians to interact with their environment and audiences in real time.

## festivals

### **BF: What was your motivation for starting Sound of Montreal and Ensemble Extrakte in 2014?**

**SB:** Around 2012–2013 I became fed up with the results of “world music” and also with those occasional bilateral exchanges with other music traditions instigated by some composers and New Music institutions. I had been involved in some of these for some time, and it was always in the framework of ‘the West and... something else.’ I began to get tired of this ‘dialogue’ format because I was interested in knowing what else New Music could do other than fortify itself with new ideas.

At that time, there was a conference in Aix-en-Provence about the concept of new universalism in music. While the old universalism of the 1950s and 1960s was seen as a colonial enterprise, this concept acknowledged the fact that people can listen to music from another culture and enjoy it, meaning there must be something in common between different musics. I was asked to contribute a text to the conference, and the thought processes it initiated led me to creating ensembles in Montreal and Berlin that would reflect a diversity of musicians and languages.

In addition to stipulating that all musicians should come from diverse backgrounds, all musicians of these ensembles would also live in the same city. What I wanted to make visible was that the cities we live in nowadays are home to so many different traditions, that this fact counters the narrative of the exotic. I called them ‘post-exotistic ensembles.’

### **BF: How did the collaboration go once these ensembles had been formed?**

**SB:** The first thing that always appears in our projects is that everything needs to be redefined. For instance, a rehearsal: it is very clear for any Western-trained musician what goes on in a rehearsal (whether classical or jazz). For an Iranian musician,

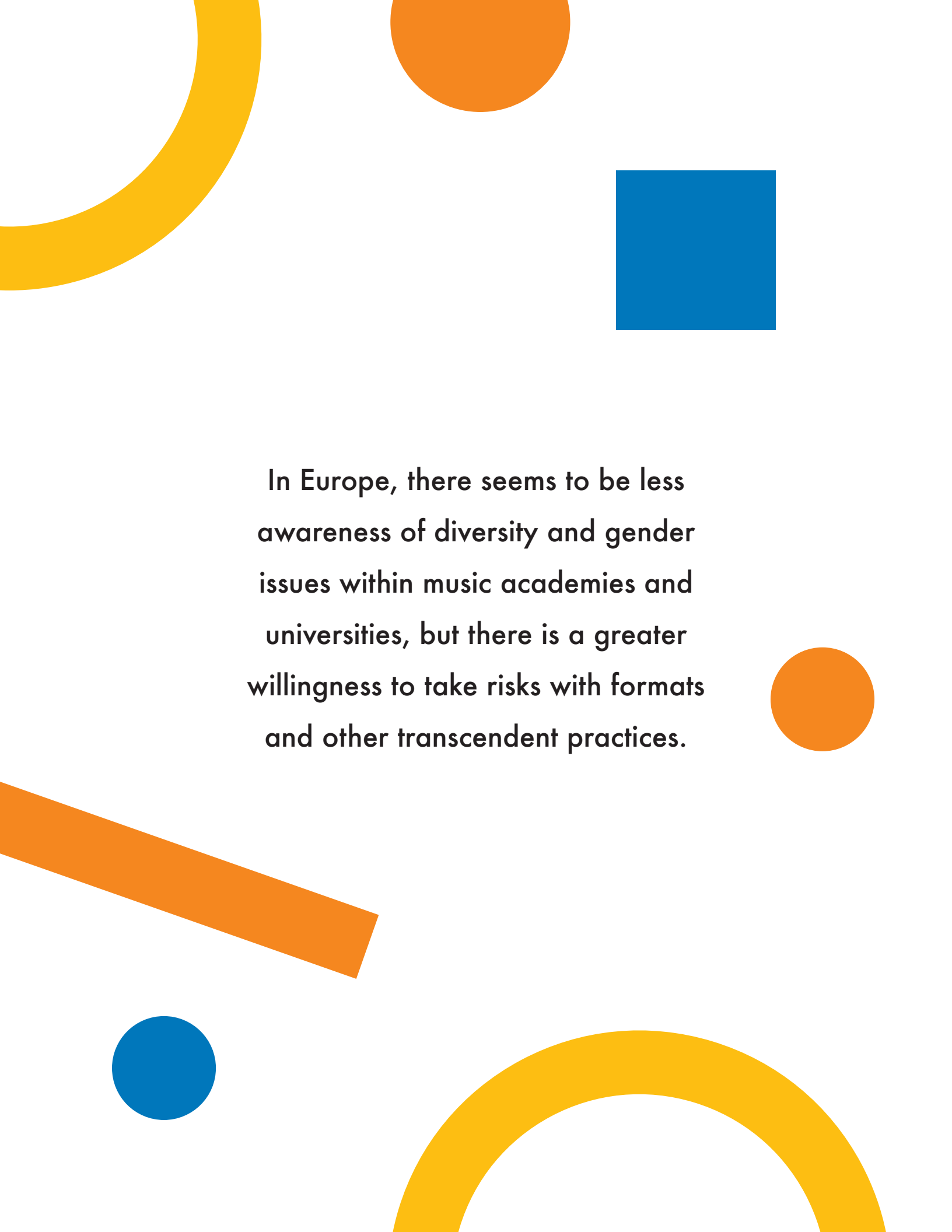
or for a Senegalese Griot, rehearsals serve different purposes, if they serve a purpose at all - and these had to be first negotiated. Were we preparing something for a concert? Was the rehearsal an end in itself? Were rehearsals about getting to know and trust each other? This of course leads to the questioning of what a concert is for. Again, there were a range of views: the concert as presentational, showing off our skills, as discovering something with the audience or, in one musician’s opinion, the presentation was more of an experiment than a concert because the audience would not understand what the musicians were doing.

### **BF: How do you attribute the sudden interest of the New Music establishment in opening up to other musical traditions?**

**SB:** Music works with memory, habits, listening habits - and it therefore often is much slower to implement changes that happen in society. Many people, even if they are intellectuals or artists, may be adventurous in one area of their life but can still be very conservative with regard to the music they listen to. Music also has a deep emotional role in people’s emotional households - and therefore interests change much more slowly.

I am not surprised that these things come 40 years late - but now that they happen they also speak about a certain despair that I have sensed in the New Music world for some time. They are about questions such as - what comes after the long century of new techniques, novel approaches, breaking with traditions ? Whatever is new can now only be incrementally new - not radically. This goes counter to the basic premise of the scene itself—namely radical change—which cannot any more happen in this context.

Given that, several factors have come together to generate this interest in opening up to other music traditions: the awareness of globalization, social issues such as gender, diversity, racial diversity -



In Europe, there seems to be less awareness of diversity and gender issues within music academies and universities, but there is a greater willingness to take risks with formats and other transcendent practices.

## festivals

as well as the influx of many people into Germany over the last ten years. All of this was not new - but it suddenly became an issue of focus. If the New Music scene wanted to stay true to another of its basic assumptions, namely that it somehow reflects societal change - then it had to react to this.

There is also a generational change. When I left Europe in 2006, everybody with power in the music business was much older than me - and now, when I visit from Canada, almost everybody is much younger than me. That generation change in itself probably propelled new visions and a new awareness of the world.

**BF: Can you talk about some of the contrasts between North America and Europe in terms of their progressivism when it comes to dealing with diversity in New Music?**

**SB:** In North America New Music never played a defining role in society, it was always so marginal that changes could happen quickly because it only mattered to a few people. Institutional support is virtually non-existent, so the power imbalances that are associated with such structures are not that steep. That being said, it is always astonishing to me that while North American musical academia is very open-minded and forward thinking in matters of diversity, the actual music scene is much more conservative in matters of aesthetic than in Europe, especially when it comes to issues like tonality or concert formats. In Europe, there seems to be less awareness of diversity and gender issues within music academies and universities, but there is a greater willingness to take risks with formats and other transcendent practices.

There are also many North American composers that engage with contemporary issues but many of them need to go to Europe to put this engagement into practice. In this way, much of this trans-Atlantic exchange can be said to involve an oscillation between theory and practice

**BF: Can you talk more about your specific solutions to addressing diversity issues in New Music programming?**

**SB:** Let me start with the term *Konzertmacher*, which I used to describe my approach to the avant-garde festival I was involved with in Munich in the 1990s. What it meant to me then was a similar shift that Szeemann had taken [ed: with his term *Ausstellungsmacher*, lit. exhibition-maker], towards what can be called a 'de-unconscionizing' of what happens when putting together a concert or an exhibition. The predominant discourse about what we do when we put together a concert or exhibition focuses largely on content, there is always a very clear understanding about the framework for what can go on.

With the term *Konzertmacher* I wanted to stress my perception that every concert is actually a very complicated construction that extends far beyond the choice of the music pieces and the performers. The current dominant concert format is one possible construct of many, a standard formula that we have adopted that we do not question any more. But once you do start to question it, everything is up in the air again. The concept of the *Konzertmacher*, is about a process through which you see that you are operating within a framework, i.e. New Music, which is a particular kind of activity within specific social circles related to certain intellectual references and traditions, etc. You then have to make a choice not only about programming, but also about format and context. In the end, choice might still be that you program eurological scores on a frontal stage for a sit-still-and-listen-audience - but this choice loses its status as the default, as suddenly many 'newly-made musics' come into view cannot be not framed by this narrative.

The solution is to kill the default options, to see them as explicit, conscious, and deliberate artistic choices. Once they are that, then other deliberate artistic choices are equally *valid*. It is not that we are

breaking the boundaries, or 'going beyond.' Rather, this is one way of doing it and there is another way of doing it that is equally legitimate, and can only be justified by rigorous 'frameworking.' That is the step ahead: not abandoning any [particular] way of doing things but instead knowing what we are doing.

If someone, knowing all these possibilities of music production and presentation, still wants to write for the piano or the orchestra, they can: it just becomes a certain choice. It needs to be thought out as to why you would make this choice, why it would be justified. This shift from something that is taken as a given to something that must be contextualized, aesthetically justified and constructed is the key step forward in this whole business.

**BF:** If New Music institutions start to 'change the framework' and open up their understanding of what music is, then how do these people decide which stories to tell?

**SB:** One of the factors that has stabilized a certain canon of musical production is the funding situation, which is very different from novel writing, poetry writing, fine arts, or filmmaking, where money tends to come from many sources. The New Music scene is unique in that it does not enjoy much private sponsorship or independent revenue – it is almost exclusively funded by governments and grants. This engenders a certain power imbalance, because the people who control this flow control everything in this scene. One obvious response would be to open up the funding structure so that many narratives can happen in parallel. Let a thousand new music festivals bloom, with widely different ways of funding them.

This is the direction that has largely been pursued in the USA. The Big Ears Festival in Knoxville for instance is run by a conglomerate of New Music people, together with people who are on the borders of New Music, write for films, but also are part of a successful indie band [The Nation]. All these different

The solution is to kill  
the default options, to  
see them as explicit,  
conscious, and  
deliberate artistic  
choices.

streams of 'novelty' in music forms can come together in one festival - and suddenly public money does not play any role in it because there is another revenue structure. This is hardly likely to happen in Europe because of different traditions of where money comes from and where it goes to.

The harder route is that of convincing those who hold the money strings that they need to diversify. Which stories do we need to tell? New Music has specialized in one particular kind of narrative, one of convincing a stubborn, indolent populace of the benefits of something revolutionary. There was an artistic calculation at the outset that this would be a success. Schoenberg believed that children in the 21st century would sing atonal melodies on the street. This has not happened. What has happened instead is a self-enclosure into this heroic narrative of the avant-garde (even though the concept itself has been dead for many years, its narrative still remains alive in the scene). That is the story that they want to tell.

They do not want tell the story of someone who is a superb proponent of an established music, for example. Or other kinds of narratives about social roles in music, such as a community-oriented event where anyone can participate. All these narratives

## festivals

are not likely to be relished in this milieu but are nevertheless narratives of people and situations in which music plays a role. Moving the focus of music institutions away from promoting a heroic avantgarde-narrative to promoting very interested and differentiated, 'many-layered' looks at how people engage with music, would be an interesting alternative. If you try to understand on what layers, what different terrains a certain practice operates, how it engages in different ways with its audience, then you are moving away from the hero narrative. That is something that I would very much like to see but I do not know how easy it would be to make that plausible to the same people who have run the system up to now.

My suspicion is that corona will help. Money will go away from New Music and that will be the moment for diverse populations, including more women, to enter the fray and get these positions. It is a general rule of society that whenever money goes away from something suddenly leading positions are filled by women and minorities who previously did not have a chance - because the people who really are focused on power and money will look for other hunting grounds. That is my cynical view on it. I do not want that to happen like this for the scene - but that is probably the only way that it will ever happen.

It also comes from my North American experience of how people make their lives work around the fact that they want to compose music. Because there is no sustainable support for it, they for instance become farmers and invite their friends to make new music festivals on their farm. Others buy, fix up and sell houses for profit to sustain their art. I have seen so many models of living with experimental and interesting music and art that I am convinced that this pursuit will endure. Many some people will not do music anymore because it will not bolster their self-image of being a successful or important person but who says that being a successful and important person and being a good musician or composer are the same thing.

# ALAIN MONGEAU

interviewed by Brandon Farnsworth

## BIO

---

**Alain Mongeau** is the founder and Director of MUTEK. A Doctor of Communications, Alain directed ISEA95 Montréal, the sixth International Symposium of Electronic Arts, as well as ISEA's head office from 1996 to 2000. He was also in charge of the New Media division of the Montréal International Festival of New Cinema from 1997 to 2001. In 2000 he launched MUTEK, a Montréal based organization dedicated to the exploration and promotion of digital creativity and electronic music. Its central platform is its annual festival in Montréal, which has become an essential North American reference point for international artists, industry professionals and diverse audiences. MUTEK also maintains activities around the world, including annual events in Mexico City, Barcelona, Tokyo and now, Buenos Aires.

## festivals

### **Brandon Farnsworth: How did MUTEK get started?**

**Alain Mongeau:** How the festival started intertwines my own personal biography and the specific institutional context of Montreal at that time. I had a PhD in Communication Studies and had been teaching and doing art, but took a turn towards organizing events when the International Symposium for Electronic Arts happened in Montreal (ISEA) in 1995 and I took the position of Artistic Director of the symposium. That moment was major shift in my life, but also was the birth of the digital arts scene we know today in Montreal.

After the 1995 symposium, I went on to co-found the Société des Arts Technologiques (Society for Arts and Technology) and became involved in the Festival du Nouveau Cinéma. Starting in 1997, it was renamed the Festival international du nouveau cinéma et des nouveaux médias de Montréal (FCMM) for a period of five years, with myself in charge of the new media section of the festival. These were also the years when the founder of Softimage, Daniel Langlois, was associated with the festival. When his company was sold to Microsoft, Langlois became a benefactor for the arts in Montreal, creating the Ex-Centris venue in 1999. When the venue opened, the film festival moved there and received an expanded mandate, which meant that I was now in charge of new media programming at the complex. The first project that I put on the table was MUTEK, which was then founded in 2000. The reason MUTEK is anchored in sound and music practices also comes from Ex-Centris, where I positioned the festival as the 'flipside' of the film festival. The two events were set six months apart so that I could have these two programming anchors for monitoring everything that was happening in new media. That was the birth of MUTEK.

With the September 11th terrorist attacks in 2001 that world collapsed, the dot-com bubble popped and the benefactor of the venue's luck turned. The film festival

in October of that year also suffered large financial losses, so the first thing they did was to abolish the New Media section I was in charge of. My work with the festival stopped there and I have focused on MUTEK ever since. MUTEK then grew pretty quickly, in its second year becoming independent of Ex-Centris. Because MUTEK started as the 'opposite' of the film festival, it still has a bias towards music and sound, but we have been trying to cover the digital arts in all its forms ever since.

### **BF: How did MUTEK build its international partnerships?**

**AM:** There is a bit of mixed history there too. After ISEA in 1995, the organization's headquarters moved to Montreal and I served as director for five years until 2000. During that time I managed this international organization, developing both a know-how and a certain level of frustration about how hard it often was to get things done. So when I resigned in 2000 I had all these ideas about how to work on an international level.

The first edition of MUTEK was inspired by the feeling that there was a lot happening in Europe and that Montreal was somewhat isolated from it, meaning I wanted to enter into dialogue with what was happening elsewhere. To our greatest surprise, after the first edition we had several festivals in Europe who wanted to collaborate with us. This led to the organic territorial expansion of the festival, which started to happen after the second edition, enabled especially through artists and their contacts. Our first international event was in 2002 with CTM in Berlin, followed by a micro edition of the festival in Chile. After that we started to respond to many organic connections, many were so interested in the connection we had with our local scene that they also wanted to import something similar to their own environments. We tried many different formats, from single nights to tours in South America or China, all very organically.

The two events were set six months apart so that I could have these two programming anchors for monitoring everything that was happening in new media. That was the birth of MUTEK.

That was the first 10 or so years. About five years ago, there was a new wave of interest in MUTEK and we decided to start formalizing things more into licensing agreements. This started with MUTEK Tokyo and then with Buenos Aires, Dubai and San Francisco, all of which are less 'open source' and a bit more ordered.

**BF: The pandemic has sped up the adoption of digital platforms. How has this affected MUTEK?**

**AM:** For us, doing something virtual today is going back to what MUTEK was doing in its first ten years. MUTEK is an event that is native to digital culture both because of its digital content but also because of how it positioned itself as a worldwide event. In our strategic planning for the first few years, we were working on three axes: The festival itself, international development and the virtual community we tried to reach out to. For a few years, we were streaming live audio from the concerts in Montreal. We then found

that when we started doing events in other countries there were audiences that were more knowledgeable about MUTEK than in Montreal because they had been connecting with us via the Internet, following the artists and the music.

In the past ten years, we have been working less on developing our virtual community and more on crystalizing live festival events in other locations, like Mexico or Barcelona. We also wanted to bring people to Montreal so we stopped streaming, but now we are going back to exactly those roots of the festival.

**BF: How did the festival adapt to the pandemic?**

**AM:** We managed to do a festival in September as a hybrid event. When the pandemic hit, we were just about to announce the first wave of artists for the regular 2020 edition. We put everything on pause, took about a month and a half to understand what

## festivals

was happening and then decided to do a mix of live, streaming and pre-recorded events. Our main reasons for doing it were to support the artists and the ecosystem of cultural and technical workers around us, keep our international connections active and maintain the link with our audience. We decided to make our own platform, but quickly had to learn how to do a lot of things like record professional multi camera video of the performances and streaming setups. Our primary concern at the beginning was not on creativity, but rather on ensuring the artists could work and giving some hope to people.

In the end we were quite happy with the results and now the platform we developed is going to be used as a hub for the upcoming collaboration between MUTEK Mexico and Japan, who decided they wanted to do something together, meaning it has become a tool also to help globally.

### **BF: How will MUTEK return to live events?**

**AM:** We are not going back to the same normality as before. Our belief is that digital concerts are going to be part of what we will be doing for the next few years. Next year we will, at the minimum, be doing a hybrid event similar to 2020 but we will be doing some more creative things with the extra time we have. Probably it will not be until 2024 that we hope to reach the heights of our record-breaking 2019 festival but I am not sure, this process will take a few years.

I am also quite aware that the global ecosystem of events is going to be quite different when we come out of this. A lot of people are going to disappear, so there is going to be a sort of massive reset, which itself comes with opportunities that could be interesting for building things that can work in a different way. There were already traces of things changing before, like artists not wanting to travel from Europe for a single performance because of their climate footprint. The world was shifting anyway, so I am not sure we can

take that whole system for granted anymore. What could be seen as a detour of going virtual during the pandemic is probably going to become part of the fabric of how we need to think about things in the future. I am not sure how to solve the equation yet with all its different elements, for instance people's digital fatigue, and it being harder to get people's attention now than at the beginning of the pandemic. The virtual is going to become central though. It is an exciting time, because change means you need to review your vision, your mandate, what you want to do and how you are doing it.

### **BF: MUTEK has been involved in two initiatives around gender equality, the Keychange Initiative and Amplify DAI. What was the motivation for getting involved in these undertakings?**

**AM:** The importance of gender parity was induced into the festival by our co-programmer Patti Schmidt, who has been involved with the festival for over a decade and who progressively brought an awareness about these issues over the years. We were very slow to pick it up but went from total unawareness of the

For us, doing something virtual today is going back to what MUTEK was doing in its first ten years.

## festivals

issue, to understanding progressively through her internal advocacy that we had to unravel our way of seeing things.

Because of that building of internal awareness I connected with Vanessa Reed from the PRS Foundation, who I came to know because MUTEK was part of previous European projects like ECAS (European Cities of Advanced Sound) and the Connecting Cities network. When Keychange started being developed, we were part of the initial discussions. Such projects are always very Eurocentric, so I was there insisting that they expand their view, for instance by connecting with the pan-American perspective that we had been developing with MUTEK's network.

With Amplify DAI, MUTEK was more central to the project, because it emerged from an exchange with the British Council in Canada. In 2017 we had a big project hosting four different cities at MUTEK as part of Montreal's 375th anniversary, with London being one of them. They were really pleased with the project and wanted to find a way of continuing the collaboration between the MUTEK and British Council networks, because both are active and working together in a number of countries. Since we had been involved with Keychange, we decided to link the project to the topic of the following year's festival in 2018, which was gender parity.

Because of the nature of the British Council's funding, instead of blending it into Keychange, they wanted to give it a different identity. For us in Montreal, it was somewhat blended together, but we started to distinguish them, allowing for Amplify DAI to continue and fly on its own. We had a second iteration last year, and are seeing the project start to grow into something that is working more independently but where Montreal and Buenos Aires MUTEKs continue participating.

Now that gender parity has been achieved and firmly established as a core value during the last three years, our next focus will be to address diversity in a

more consequential way.

### **BF: What have the biggest challenges been in realizing a gender equal festival?**

**AM:** We started not even being aware that there was a problem. We also had this notion that there were not so many women active in electronic arts. Four or five years ago, it was really easy to come up with a list of 100 male artists but more difficult to get 100 names of women. We had to make an effort to find them and it took a few years of being aware and creating a space, allowing ourselves to take risks on people who were unknown, basically nurturing a space for this to happen, but then the mechanism started to roll on its own. There still remain a disproportionate number of men in the field, so we do still need to keep up our programming efforts. We have been inspired by the work of some of our peers, and hope that our own efforts will encourage some other festivals to adopt these practices.

The same goes now for diversity. We want to have diverse lineups but if we look at our self-imposed mandate of having 50% national content, most of it coming from around Montreal, at first it seems a bit far-fetched to think that you could find a diverse lineup of artists, but actually if you make the effort, this also becomes natural, and we will see that there is a diversity of artistic scenes we have not fostered within our own festival. Achieving this is a process we commit to accelerating.

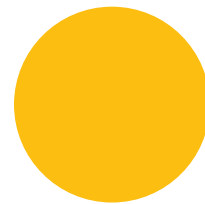
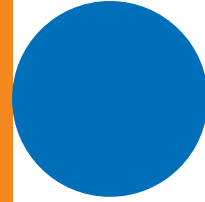
Our goal will be to put together lineups that feature 50% Canadian artists and that are balanced and diverse. Down the road, we want this balance to become a natural reflex.

These processes are also transforming what the festival is about. I used to consider that we were quite a purist festival in terms of our aesthetic direction. But festivals have a role to play beyond just a certain aesthetic, which I think we are tuning in to. We

## festivals

give a lot of importance to preserving the festival's significance for its audiences, we care that it continues to evolve in relation to its communities, so being open to change is the only way to remain relevant, even if it means that we have to periodically revisit the festival's mission. Eventually, I think we will reach a balance where our social and aesthetic dimensions cross-pollinate, which is itself an interesting process. In the end, we are not a commercial festival, we are funded by governments, so we bear both an aesthetic and a social responsibility, which is what we aspire to attune.

The importance of gender parity was induced into the festival by our co-programmer Patti Schmidt, who has been involved with the festival for over a decade and who progressively brought an awareness about these issues over the years.



# PETER MEANWELL & TINE RUDE (BOREALIS – A FESTIVAL FOR EXPERIMENTAL MUSIC)

interviewed by **Brandon Farnsworth**

## BIO

---

**Borealis** is a festival for experimental music in Bergen, Norway. Working with living composers, sound artists, improvisers, musicians and artists, Borealis has made a clear stand on gender balance and broader representation in its programming, audience and organisation. Working extensively on what it means to have mutual respect, Borealis wants to be a festival full of great art and music, but that also makes the world less racist and less sexist.

**Tine Rude** is Managing Director of Borealis – a festival for experimental music, since 2014. She is committed to creating an organisation that is welcoming and inclusive to everyone, and is dedicated to confronting established truths about gender and representation, and how to make a festival more important for more people. She has extensive experience as a producer in the performing arts and music, and in initiating methods to strengthen the role of the producer and develop strong organisations. She has previously worked as an Arts Advisor for the City of Bergen, in charge of performing arts, music and electronic art.

**Peter Meanwell** is a curator and radio maker exploring the collision of new sound practices with social and political ideas. Living in Bergen, Norway, he is artistic director of Borealis - a festival for experimental music, where he has curated an annual programme of new composed music, performance and sound since 2014. He is also Director of radio production company Reduced Listening Ltd., who make BBC Radio's flagship experimental music shows Late Junction and freeness, and teaches at the Darmstadt International Summer Course for New Music.

## festivals

**Brandon Farnsworth:** How has your festival developed over the past six years?

**Peter Meanwell:** Our first step was changing the name. We wanted to create a space that had fewer borders and fewer boundaries for people and a 'festival for experimental music' was the most open title that we could come up with that was also the least exclusionary. We wanted the festival to include music that was notated, improvised and electronic as well as outsider music forms, people who use sound in movement practices, in visual art practices. We also wanted to flatten the hierarchies that exist socially around Western classical musics and non-classical musics, as well as the structures that they inhabit. It is also a festival *for*, not *of*, music, to highlight that it was aimed at the community here in Bergen.

**Tine Rude:** It felt like we needed a new opening, a huge box that we could put a lot of stuff into.

**PM:** Another aspect is that if we are saying that we are open to different modes of expression, then we have to give value to all those different modalities. We still have club nights but we give them the same value in the programme as the big orchestral commissions.

**TR:** There are no headliners for our festival, there is no part that is more important than the others. Everyone gets one page in the program book, about an hour in the program and the same amount of attention from us in the festival.

**PM:** We saw that there was a need to take the festival out of what was perhaps a smaller, closed community of people who had an interest in exploratory music forms. There are not enough people in this small city in a small country to make any niche work audience-wise. The story of what we have done over the past 6 years has been to create a festival frame. We hold a space in the middle for the art to be as exploratory as it needs to be, then our job as curators is to frame it for the audience so that the barriers to entry are as low as possible.

**BF:** Has the concept of what is 'exploratory' changed over the course of working on the festival?

**PM:** The first answer is practical. We have a maximum of 25-30 slots in the festival once a year, and have laid ourselves open to all musical expressions. There is never room to get everything in, or to come up with a definitive answer to anything.

I am asked a lot what defines experimental music. Often it is what I find compelling at the time but I also try to program through a lot of conversation, sharing resources, and co-commissioning. Exploratory means that the artist is making music or sound that is pushing at the boundaries of the form that they exist within. We are not taking a homogenous understanding of exploration, because if it is an orchestral composer, it means one thing and for someone who works in the club or electronic space it could be another thing. Still, I am looking for that same feeling of not having ever heard somebody do that before.

People ask us all the time if e.g. experimental pop music can also be included. The question is about which boundaries are being pushed: They can be social, or contextual boundaries, not just for the global new music scene, but also for the very local music scene, to a national New Music community. What may seem like an exploratory composition may have a different tone when it comes to working with a specific group of people in our local community in Bergen.

There is also a lot of trying to find ways to present each musical form with integrity. We want to present music that people want to come to and need to build the reputation of the festival internationally, which allows us to take part in bigger collaborations, so there is a structural ambition as well. You cannot ignore any of the interlocking parts, is what it comes down to.

## festivals

### **BF:** What does the Borealis of the future look like?

**TR:** We want to make sure that we have a festival where people have a platform to present new ideas. It is not just what we will present and what it will look like but also how we get there, in other words creating an organization that keeps being able to build trust with artists but also with the audience. What we want is a place where you can dig into bigger questions, where people are being pushed to think and maybe confronted with new opinions. I hope that it is seen as an alternative to the established structure or idea about how the world should be.

**PM:** It is about the festival being a sustainable organism. Festivals are usually very heavily dependent on the personality of the artistic director. What we have seen over the last six years is that it is not just about putting on concerts, but rather about building a framework for what this festival entity is. When people come into this utopian space that we try to build, we want people to connect with ideas as well as with sound, with conversations. If we can create a sustainable framework for that, and all of those practical things are in place as well, then it is not just reduced to personal whim.

That becomes really important because, when we leave, we do not want to see the festival revert to being less progressive. These are things that we want to change, because it also reflects what has to change in the industry and the culture. We want to use the festival as a tool to do that and become a platform that has more equity within it, has a different structure, more sustainable staffing, which will mean that there is more potential for the festival to be what it wants to be going forward.

**TR:** One way we are doing this is not just by popping up in March but rather trying to be present over the course of the year as well. This is an important tool to make sure that we are also a sustainable organization

in the years to come. We are there for a reason, which is to support what is happening in the city.

**PM:** Specifically, this means that we run a monthly listening club, we have a mentorship program for emerging composers, an audience engagement program called Radius that we are running over three years and we have started a new artist in residency program focussing on artists combining sonic and social practices.

**TR:** A festival needs to be engaged and interested, listening and meeting people, audiences and artists throughout the year. The point is to take on a bigger space, even as a tiny organization, giving it more time to be understood.

**PM:** We did not want to start doing a program that asked for audiences outside of our existing one to trust us until we were sure we could give the time commitment and build trust. That took a lot of structural work with the funders, a lot of time applying for funding, coming up with programs to create resilience within the organization that meant that we could then give the necessary time and space and to build trust.

Such an infrastructure  
only comes from  
sustained, serious  
investment in making  
it a sustainable  
organization.

## festivals

Even if you want to make a great program, you need to have an organization to back that up. By that I do not mean the right producers or marketing team but rather making a program that is transformational within the community and gives as many people the opportunity to access this exploratory sonic space that we are trying to provide. To be able to come into contact with the questions that this raises you have to have an infrastructure that enables this. However, such an infrastructure only comes from sustained, serious investment in making it a sustainable organization.

We are not a large festival but we are invested in building the organization in order to build the things that we want to do. Small festivals run the risk of spending all their budget on artistic programming, not investing in anything administrative, then each year finding themselves in the situation where they cannot expand, or finance an audience program, which then leads to a cyclical argument. You have to invest in the organization in order to enable things with much greater potential.

**BF:** How do you see your approach in relation to other major contemporary music festivals?

**PM:** Smaller, exploratory music festivals like ours often understand themselves as for a certain community and have a certain vibe to them. We have big ambitions and want to take a credible space within the community. At the same time, we are not Ultima, not a fixture in the city calendar, not in the main budgets.

**TR:** We are often seen maybe as a bigger organization than we are. We share a lot of ideas in common with larger festivals and try to collaborate but, when it comes to structures and finances, then you start to see the differences.

**PM:** At the same time we are still in a very privileged position here. In that context we do share a lot of

values with those organizations. I think we are slightly more flexible than those other bigger organizations though, because some of the burden of the local context is taken by other organizations here and, in a national context, we are also more free to create our own space. Ultima is, in contrast, the biggest contemporary classical music festival in the Nordic region and has a responsibility to be representative. Being small also has its advantages. You can represent the scene but come up with different ways of doing it. When we collaborate with the opera, the orchestra, or any of the larger historical classical music institutions, we are able to challenge things and have the ability to say no and go somewhere else.

**BF:** Does your heterogeneous approach to programming lead to the artistic directorship to take over authorship of the festival?

**PM:** As we have seen in the visual art world, curatorial narratives have at times started to subsume artistic intentionality. That is something we are aware of. There are also parts of the festival where we are more in charge of the concept but that is discussed with the artists as well. The key for us is that each project is presented with integrity. My curatorial role is to think about the way that the audience approaches the programming and stay with it throughout the day.

What we found spreading the festival events around the city is that you are more likely to find the whole audience going to three different events on the same day than if you do them on separate days. The person who comes to the string quartet concert could then maybe come to the improvisation concert and vice versa. Rather than try to impose a very strict curatorial narrative on top of everything, we want to treat each work with the space that it needs but put it within a framework that allows the audience to have an exploratory journey. They may then find themselves in a musical space that they might not have signed up for, which again requires people to trust you.

## A PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT FROM THE FEMINIST MILITIA AND BOREALIS

The feminist militia are a group of women, non-binary and queer people that have been working together to figure out how to live and exist in a patriarchal society dominated by whiteness and operating under capitalism. We want to feel safe, we want to thrive, we want to know that our experiences / genders / bodies will be taken into consideration even when they don't fit into the dominant culture. Down with dominant culture!  
Up with art for all!

The feminist militia have consulted Borealis. Together, we aim to uphold the following:

### INTENTIONAL SPACE

- We don't assume anyone's gender, origin or sexuality.
- We ask for consent before touching anyone. Their bodies, their choice!
- We have a zero tolerance policy towards harassment and prejudice of any kind, including sexual harassment and violence.
- If you feel threatened, unwell, or unsafe at any event, as well as bar staff and security, there will be volunteers in yellow t-shirts and militia members in red hand wraps available to help you. We are there to act as points of connection, support or help if you might need it – think of the militia like a big sibling, backing you up and fighting your corner.

### ACCESSIBILITY

- We aim for all our venues to be wheelchair accessible, to have gender neutral toilets and enough seating for those who need it.
- Our ideal would be to provide a sanctuary space at every venue that could act as a more intimate quiet zone as we recognise that busy public events don't always suit

everyone. Since we can't promise this, the militia are on hand to take a break with you or find some chill space.

### MILITIA PALS

- If you're coming alone to a Borealis event and want to touch base with someone or a sober pal, email us at [billett@borealisfestival.no](mailto:billett@borealisfestival.no) beforehand and we will link you up with a militia member.

Egalitarian values and a commitment to social change are at the core of Borealis but there is a lot of work to be done to make this a clear and meaningful reality at music events and parties everywhere.

Through our artist led project *Doing Not Saying* with Jenny Moore we understood that we cannot solve the problem of inequality alone and that we rely on collaborative, critical thinking to inspire us all to make the arts more inclusive. The feminist militia is a shifting and growing group whom have workshopped these ideas, beginning the process we hope to continue in the coming years in order to create policies and practices that will reach beyond this festival and into our city of Bergen.

We're not a judge or jury, nor are we without our own internalised prejudices. We are open to feedback and discussion as we find ways to work together on what it means to have mutual respect.

---

Borealis thanks the feminist militia and Jenny Moore for their activism, and Unsound in Poland and Pxssy Palace in the UK for their words, leadership and thinking around safer spaces.

The feminist militia would like to thank Lizzie Borden for her fictional women's army in the film *Born in Flames* which has challenged us to think about non-violent responses to a violent world.

## KUNNGJØRING FRA FEMINISTMILITSEN OG BOREALIS

Feministmilitsen er en gruppe med kvinner, ikke-binære og skeive mennesker som sammen har forsøkt å finne ut hvordan vi kan leve og eksistere i et patriarkalsk samfunn, dominert av hvithet, som opererer under kapitalismen.

Vi ønsker å føle oss trygge, vi vil utfolde oss, vi vil vite at våre erfaringer/kjønn/kropper tas i betraktning selv når de ikke passer inn i den dominerende kulturen.

Nei til dominanskultur! Ja til kunst for alle!

Feministmilitsen har konsultert Borealis. Sammen går vi inn for å opprettholde følgende:

### ET ØNSKE OM TRYGGE ROM FOR ALLE

- Vi gjør ingen antagelser om andres kjønn, opprinnelse eller seksualitet.
- Vi ber om tillatelse før vi tar på noen. Deres kropp, deres valg!
- Vi har nulltoleranse for trakassering og fordomsfulle handlinger av enhver art, inkludert seksuell trakassering og vold.
- Hvis du føler deg truet, utilpass eller utrygg på et arrangement vil det, i tillegg til sikkerhetsvakter og baransatte, være frivillige i gule t-skjorter og medlemmer av feministmilitsen med røde bånd rundt hendene tilstede. Vi er der for å fungere som et koblingspunkt, gi støtte eller hjelp om du skulle trenge det. Tenk på feministmilitsen som et eldre søsken, som passer på deg og kjemper din sak.

### TILGJENGELIGHET

- Vi jobber for at alle våre arenaer skal være rullestolvennlige, ha kjønnsnøytrale toaletter og at det skal være nok sitteplasser til dem som trenger det.
- Vårt ideal er å kunne tilby et fristed på hver arena, som fungerer som en mer intim, stille sone, da vi forstår at folksomme offentlige arrangement ikke alltid passer for alle. Siden

vi ikke kan love dette, er feministmilitsens medlemmer tilgjengelig for å ta en pause med deg, eller finne et mer avslappet område å være i.

### EN NY VENN

- Hvis du kommer på et Borealis-arrangement alene og har lyst å møte noen, eller ønsker å være med noen som er edru, kan du sende oss en e-post på forhånd til [billett@borealisfestival.no](mailto:billett@borealisfestival.no), så møter et medlem av feministmilitsen deg på arrangementet.

Egalitære verdier og forpliktelse til sosial forandring er selve kjernen i Borealis, men det krever mye innsats å gjøre ord om til handling, og å gjøre disse verdiene om til en tydelig og meningsfull virkelighet på musikkarrangementer og klubbkvelder overalt.

Gjennom vårt kunstnerdrevende prosjekt *Doing Not Saying*, med Jenny Moore i spissen, har vi forstått at vi ikke kan løse problemet med ulikhet alene, men at vi er helt avhengig av samarbeid og kritisk tenkning for å inspirere oss alle til å gjøre kunsten mer inkluderende. Feministmilitsen er en dynamisk og voksende gruppe som gjennom en rekke samlinger i 2019 har utformet disse idéene. Vi håper at vi i årene fremover kan fortsette prosessen vi nå har startet for å skape en praksis og utforme retningslinjer som kan nå utover Borealis sin sfære og ut i byen vår, Bergen.

Vi er ikke dommere eller en jury. Vi er heller ikke fritatt våre egne forutinntatte fordommer. Vi er åpne for tilbakemelding og diskusjon, slik at vi sammen kan forsøke å finne ut av hva det vil si å ha gjensidig respekt.

Borealis takker feministmilitsen og Jenny Moore for deres aktivisme, Unsound i Polen og Pxsy Palace i Storbritannia for deres ord, lederskap og tenkning rundt det å skape tryggere rom.

Feministmilitsen vil takke Lizzie Borden for hennes fiktive kvinnehær i filmen *Born in Flames* som utfordret oss til å tenke på fredelige tilsvar til en voldelig verden.

## festivals

**TR:** We want to create experiences that people would not have signed up for if they only had to pick one concert. We want to create a journey that gives people access to music that they would maybe not have otherwise known that they wanted to take part in.

**BF:** What role does the festival organization itself play in fostering these journeys?

**PM:** It is about giving legitimacy to different lineages of musicmaking. It is then important that the festival creates a common framework that does not distinguish between individual genres but simply says that they are all Borealis events where everyone feels welcome and where they can then be confronted on an artistic level with something perhaps unexpected.

One of the pitfalls that we have found in having a diverse program is that in the early days we had not yet thought about diversity from a structural point of view. For instance the fee for someone doing a performance set vs. an orchestra commission is not the same thing: Just because the program book is representationally diverse does not mean that it is diverse in where the money goes within the festival.

Within the formal commissioning system, we started by making sure that we are commissioning a diverse range of composers. Another approach was re-examining how we could come up with other project structures that do not rely on a classical music commissioning framework in order to access public money. If you can write for orchestra, it is not an issue, but the question becomes whether we need to build new structures where we can leverage money for artistic creation without relying on artists having a specific music education. This is an ongoing process for us that has perhaps never been more keenly felt than right at this moment where we have to interrogate what this means in relation to the larger music field.

**TR:** We started with very specific goals, e.g. in

regards to gender balance, which often comes down to counting and looking at structures. There is a lot of hard work behind the scenes that has taken time to get into our structures and which is still an ongoing process that I think is difficult to start and to find where the starting point is. It is important that these values are deeply grounded in the whole of the organization, be it with Peter and I, the staff, the board, how we talk and train our volunteers, festival staff, or the security company we employ, etc., so not just relating to how we make the program and our money.

**PM:** We are trying to combine the musical and the political. The festival is moving towards acknowledging that all art is made within a set of political and social circumstances that need to be considered. We are combining that curatorial aspect with the organizational aspect as well, something that we have been working on with our co-director model, where Tine Rude and I have equal weight within the organization, we take equal salary, we make decisions together, intertwining the organizational and the curatorial.

**TR:** We have been recognizing that that is something we are doing differently and talking about it with peers in the industry.

**BF: How are you implementing a diversity strategy within the festival itself?**

**TR:** We are still a small team but we expand in the months running up to the festival with an intern program. That is where we try to find people that we can see are new cultural workers. Within these, we have about 15 new people in each year. That is one way of trying to reach out to a more diverse group of people. We are still trying to find better ways to get recommendations for people where we could benefit from having their voice heard within the administration.

## festivals

**PM:** It would probably be easier for us to get a couple of very experienced producers in the cultural scene to work with us all year round. Instead we devote a lot of time and energy to bringing in people from diverse backgrounds to become our producers for the festival, which requires a lot of training, mentoring and cultural capital that goes into those roles. We often see them go on to get better jobs at bigger festivals in the city.

Norway also has a very strong volunteering culture, in that every culture event has a large cohort of volunteers who help with taking tickets, etc. and in exchange get free tickets and some work experience. We have up to 100 volunteers working at the festival doing a few shifts. We have used this tradition as a site for looking at who we can bring into the organization, such as working with organizations who work with newly arrived refugees in the country, or different community groups that we can work with to give new work experience to people.

**TR:** We are also looking at how we are working with volunteers. We have even found among volunteers people who have then begun jobs as interns in the organization, and become part of the festival team itself. It also comes back to what we have onstage.

Having a diverse program says something about us wanting a more diverse organization behind the scenes too. It is connected and we are slowly getting better at it.

**PM:** The *Doing Not Saying* project we started this year was the pinnacle of a much longer journey. It was not without its challenges but it asked a lot of difficult questions of the team and really challenged us to go beyond a performative allyship into a practical movement.

This means that we now have a set of gender-non-binary toilet signs we put up on all venues and we know how to implement this across all of our venues. We now know how to have conversations with security companies in the city about what it means to have a tolerant space and to respect how we expect our audiences need to be respected. We have a new training framework we are developing for everyone who volunteers at the festival about non-violent confrontation and diffusing situations.

For us the biggest challenge now is how to get away from superficial treatments of diversity such as just having debates at our festival and asking more how do we root it in action, how it connects structurally to the organization that we run. We want this festival to be changed in its DNA and in its structure. It will take time and sacrifice but this has emerged as the most important objective. Not that the music itself does not matter but rather understanding that if we change the organization, we change who can be considered a composer and who can be valued as an artist, which in turn benefits the artform, the music and the audience. If we can do that for our own organization and put pressure on those around us to do the same, we will live in a changed artistic environment, which would make us very happy.

The festival is moving  
towards acknowledging  
that all art is made within  
a set of political and  
social circumstances that  
need to be considered

# MERJA HOTTINEN

interviewed by Brandon Farnsworth

## BIO

---

**Merja Hottinen** (1976, Finland) is a music researcher and writer based in Helsinki. She has studied musicology and communication at the University of Helsinki and is currently finishing her PhD research on Finnish contemporary music festivals. Her research interests focus on the social and cultural aspects of contemporary music, as well as the role of music in society in general. She works as Research Manager at Music Finland, the export organization for Finnish music, and as the chief editor for *Kompositio* magazine, the biannual magazine of the Society of Finnish Composers. Previously, she has worked as editor-in-chief for *Finnish Music Quarterly* magazine, as Communications Editor for the Finnish Music Information Centre, and as researcher, teacher, and administrator at the University of Helsinki.

## festivals

**Brandon Farnsworth:** The concept of curatorial practice has become increasingly relevant to contemporary music festivals in many parts of Europe over the past few years. Do you see this same trend happening at Finnish festivals?

**Merja Hottinen:** I have not actually seen anyone calling themselves 'curators' in the context of contemporary music festivals in Finland, though there was supposed to be a course at the Time of Music Festival this summer about curating contemporary music. The concept of curating connects to what I have seen happening at festivals here, which is that they are focusing more on making interesting combinations of work instead of selecting and presenting 'the best works' of a musical canon. This may be connected to the trend of people elsewhere calling themselves curators, in that directors are emphasizing their own subjective choices in programming.

**BF:** How present are issues of gender representation in Finnish new music? Are there attempts to have gender-balanced programs?

**MH:** They are quite present and there has been a lively discussion about this along with various initiatives. Many festivals and institutions want to make gender-balanced programs, for example Ung Nordisk Musik has a strict gender ratio for their programming. Another example is violinist Pekka Kuusisto, the former artistic director of Meidän Festivaali (Our Festival), who has spoken about this very actively and organized an all-female program there in 2015.

Last year though, there was a small study (commissioned by Pekka Kuusisto) done about classical music festivals in Finland which found that 95% of works were composed by men, and only 5% by women. Roughly 45% of the festivals also did not have any female composers on their programs. Obviously the contemporary music scene is very concerned by this because there are lots of female

composers to select from but those doing Baroque music, for example, are more reserved even though we know that there are female composers in every period of history. In terms of activism, there is a group of researchers called Suoni who are doing what they call activist musicology. One of their issues is gender balance, which researcher Susanna Välimäki, for example, is investigating.

Issues around race and ethnicity are even more problematic than gender because the classical music scene in Finland is still very white – like most of the society in general. Of course, there are quite a lot of migrant composers in Finland, with people coming from many different countries, so there is an awareness of such issues there and many composers have worked actively with migrant musicians and their traditions, like Paola Livorsi who has integrated music from different parts of the world into her own work.

**BF:** There is also the issue of the Sámi.

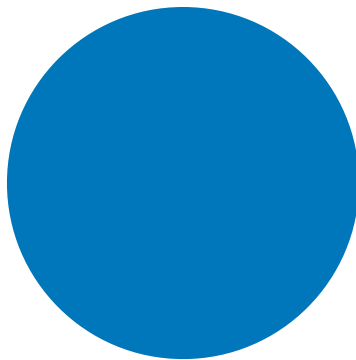
**MH:** The Sámi are more present in Finland's world music scene, where it is possible to work and interact with all the different styles of contemporary Sámi music – including modern Yoik and Sámi music's more experimental edge. Then there are some composers like Outi Tarkiainen from Lapland who have actively tried to bring Sámi elements, for example Sámi poems, into the contemporary classical music scene.

**BF:** You have researched three of Finland's major contemporary music festivals for your doctoral dissertation, *Musica Nova Helsinki, Time of Music and the Tampere Biennale*. How have these festivals developed and changed over time?

**MH:** All of these festivals were founded in the 1980s. *Musica Nova Helsinki* was originally called the Helsinki Biennale. The Helsinki Biennale and *Time of Music* were both founded by composer Jukka Tiensuu and were very much based on a modernist ideology.

## festivals

Last year though, there was a small study (commissioned by Pekka Kuusisto) done about classical music festivals in Finland which found that 95% of works were composed by men, and only 5% by women.



## festivals

At that time Tiensuu felt that the 'master works,' as he called them, of contemporary music were never played in Finland, so he wanted to bring them to Finnish audiences.

First he started the Helsinki Biennale, which is more of a festival for larger institutions, including both big Helsinki-based orchestras – the Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra and the Helsinki Philharmonic—meaning it had the capacity to perform these great big orchestral works in Helsinki.

Time of Music was founded the year after. It was conceived as a course for composers and musicians to learn about international trends and learn to play contemporary music. Tiensuu used his large international network to bring really influential people to Finland to teach. He was also part of Korvat auki (Ears Open Society), a movement which also included composers like Magnus Lindberg, Esa-Pekka Salonen and Kaija Saariaho. Korvat auki had this really modernist, forward-looking ethos at the time. The composers involved were all quite young but already had good connections internationally and a very international mindset.

These festivals diversified the audience's understanding of music by questioning the whole concept of music. A large part of the audience in Finland at that time had maybe never heard radical or modernist works. This was also a time of economic growth and technical innovation, so people were really interested in everything that was new and the concert audiences were actually quite large. To mention some examples from that period, John Cage was in Finland in 1983 and Steve Reich in 1985. You can see from the press clippings that they were really something very new here and something really exotic for the larger audience.

In the 1990s artistic directors started to look beyond the canonized works. For example, Esa-Pekka Salonen brought African music to the Helsinki

Biennale, together with Ligeti and Berio, who were using African influences. This shows how festivals tried to look for music outside of Europe but of course it was still all within this rather modernist atmosphere. Later in the 1990s there were also quite a lot of Neo-Romantic works at the festivals that were trying to break the boundaries, while also trying to broaden their audiences, without giving in to popularity too much.

**BF:** How do you define this 'modernist' musical approach?

**MH:** 'Modernity' here refers to what the Finnish press called modern at the time. Of course this was already the 1980s, so stylistically much of the music could be considered 'post-modern'. What I would define as 'modernist' here is an approach to what is new and forward-looking in music. It is connected to an attitude of progress and development and how the institution of contemporary music is carried on with new works. Then, in the 1990s, the question was not so much what is new but rather what is different.

In any case, the 2000s were actually very active in regards to festivals. The Helsinki Biennale was only every other year, as the name suggests, until 1997, when it changed its name to Musica Nova Helsinki and was organized yearly until 2007. That was quite a lot of new music for Helsinki audiences. After that it has been arranged again only every other year.

Musica nova, as well as Time of Music and the Tampere Biennale, focused on having themes at that time. They wanted to present music around some core subject, be it profiling one or two composers, or some kind of overarching idea. Musica Nova Helsinki often focused on the music of a particular place, like British music, music in Vienna, New York, etc. It was a way of giving people more information about what's happening outside Helsinki and bringing them the experience of being somewhere else.

In the 2010s themes became less relevant. If there

## festivals

was a theme it was more conceptual or open, more about making new, personal combinations. I think one reason for this has been Spotify and YouTube and how many more opportunities there are to hear new works, meaning you do not need festivals to learn about music scenes in other places anymore. Festivals become about getting new insight, or understanding something new. This means that the significance of festivals in general has changed and they have to do something different in order to differentiate themselves from other cultural offerings. At least in Helsinki, there is already quite a lot of things to hear.

**BF: You mentioned how many festivals were founded to bring international talents to Finland. Has there been a shift towards working with more local talent over the past 10 years?**

**MH:** It depends on the festival. This year, the Tampere Biennale was going to feature only Finnish performers and music and that is actually quite rare even though it is a festival dedicated to contemporary Finnish music. I think the main reason was environmental and that they could avoid having to fly anyone in. Everybody could have come with a little less environmental cost. In the 1990s there was a strong trend towards Finnish music at the Helsinki Biennale. That was mostly for economic reasons because it was in the middle of an economic depression. They invited various Finnish orchestras to play there, which they could do with little money.

**BF: Can you talk about your research methodology? Were you talking to festival directors?**

**MH:** No, I decided not to interview them for my research. My point of interest is where the music meets society and I have concentrated on the public presentation of the festival. Of course, the views of the festival directors or composers, for that matter, would have been different. They have to plan ahead

several years for future festivals and works and the mainstream cultural atmosphere follows only later on. I looked instead at press clippings about the festivals, because there you can see what is new to the general public, what they do not expect. I also use statistics about the programs, so you can see which composers are actually played at the festivals. My approach is to look at dominant discourses and how they have changed over time. I also have specific questions like how the press has spoken over time about the audience, listening to contemporary music, composing, or about technical aspects of music. What becomes visible are the similarities across the 40 years I am studying but also some quite big changes. The local/international aspect is one that I am specifically interested in. In the early years, nationalities were actually quite important in these festivals. Nowadays it has become increasingly cosmopolitan and people's backgrounds are not as clearly defined as they were before. The press no longer bothers to name artists' nationality, for example, because it is not so interesting but also more difficult to define. This is also a clear indication that there has been a change in the rhetoric of internationality itself.

**BF: What is the role of these festivals in society?**

**MH:** I think that these festivals have now found their place and that this question was maybe more pressing for them some years ago. For example, Time of Music has now clearly focused on doing courses and international networking for music students and professionals. Previously there was a lot of public discussion about why there were so few people at their concerts but this question is now less relevant.

In Tampere they have found a connection to the local culture in the city and created their own profile in relation to other music festivals and other events in the city. They have also brought in a lot of young artists and composers, as well as projects with other

## festivals

art forms like sound art and performance art. The audiences are often small there too but regardless the festival has become a way to present music that is interesting both nationally and locally.

Musica Nova Helsinki is now run by André de Ridder. Because he is not part of the Finnish musical establishment, he was able to take an outside view and work on amplifying what was interesting in the festival already. The challenge in Helsinki is that there are multiple partners, so the artistic director cannot really do everything they would want. The institutions involved have their own audiences with their own expectations and artistic decisions have to take those into consideration as well.

### **BF: What other challenges are these festivals facing?**

**MH:** In my view the challenges all come down to funding eventually. In Tampere it is the City of Tampere that provides the basis for the festival. They do have income from multiple sources but it comes down to the city to decide if the festival continues to exist or not. In the festival's past this has not always been self-evident. At Time of Music it is the international projects that really bring in the money. In Helsinki all these organizational issues also come down to funding. It is about who pays for what, so there is a lot of negotiation that must take place.

### **BF: Many other art forms are increasingly engaging with how they relate to their audiences, and to important social issues and societal debates. Do you also see a shift happening among the Finnish contemporary music scene?**

**MH:** The new generation of Finnish composers will be more prominent at festivals in coming years and they show a new kind of readiness to discuss societal issues, like the environment. They are well connected internationally and know well what happens outside

Finland.

But you cannot just take discussions from other art forms or from abroad and bring them to Finnish contemporary music scene as such, since the context is different. The status of contemporary music in Finland has grown to be quite good and the composers have enjoyed just doing their own work, not minding politics or societal issues so much. Because of this these issues have not been so present in the Finnish festival scene until now.

But the context changes too. With the new generation, everything is getting more competitive and their horizons are broader—more global, I would say. They are more connected to other arts and other issues besides music, they see things in another light.

It is not just about bringing international influences to Finland but also making something unique and interesting. For example, a festival called Silence (Hiljaisuus-festivaali) was founded in a small village in Lapland some years ago, with composer Outi Tarkiainen as its artistic director for several years. There is circus, contemporary music and artists from

**The new generation of Finnish composers will be more prominent at festivals in coming years and they show a new kind of readiness to discuss societal issues, like the environment.**

different fields that come together and create music and art and put on concerts.

**BF:** Time of Music has been cancelled, the Tampere Biennale is doing a radio festival together with UNM and Musica Nova has the luck (or the curse) of being programmed next year. What impact do you think this pandemic will have on Finnish music? What lessons do you think can be learned from it going forward?

**MH:** Obviously everything being cancelled has been a big hit. In particular the freelance musicians do not have any income at all. Many of the composers have scholarships but they too are uncertain about their future performances and whether they will get delayed by a year or two. There have been some special projects that have tried to look for other ways to produce music and create, like via streaming. For example, composer Pasi Lyytikäinen did a kind of composition diary, where he has composed a miniature piece every day and put it on Twitter (#compositiondiary) and had people perform the pieces all over the world. People have to look at the core values of what they do and why they do it. If people still really want to make more new music, they will find ways to do that. For some composers this has been a good time to concentrate on their work. Many musicians have just continued performing, doing streaming for online audiences, even though perhaps they have not had any income from it—just because that is what they want to do. Of course you cannot perform for free indefinitely but it has stopped us from doing the same thing year in and year out. Now we have an opportunity to really think why we are doing what we are doing, build on it and maybe find new ways to finance it.

People have to look at the core values of what they do and why they do it. If people still really want to make more new music, they will find ways to do that.

# ANNE MARGVARDBSEN & ANNA BERIT ASP CHRISTENSEN (SPOR FESTIVAL)

interviewed by **Brandon Farnsworth**

## BIO

---

**Anne Marqvardsen** (DK) is curator, artistic director and festival manager. Master of Arts in Musicology and Art from University of Copenhagen and studies at Technische Universität Berlin. Since 2007 she has functioned as Artistic and Festival Director for SPOR festival with the vision to thematise, actualize and promote the contemporary music and sound art, nationally as well as international.

Anne Marqvardsens work and practice are centered around a continuous focus on how to create strong and relevant connections between the contemporary music & art scenes, between music & society, and to stimulate diversity within the art form and the curating of music events.

**Anna Berit Asp Christensen** is an artist and curator with strong roots in both classical and new music. Her activities are partly based on her past as a practicing, classically trained musician, and partly related to comprehensive work on the theory and dissemination of music. Her practice is characterized by a constant investigation of the potential of experimental art music as well as its range and position on the contemporary art scene. Christensen's work has displayed an impressive breadth in its knowledge of repertoire – also within various art forms ranging from art music and sound art to performance art, modern dance and concept art. This finds expression in her works, which mainly seek to link up with other art forms in order to place music in new perspectives. Typical of Christensen is her ability to compose meetings, between musical genres as well as to get music to cohere as an unified genre compared to other art genres.

## festivals

**Brandon Farnsworth:** Your first edition of SPOR in 2007 looked quite a bit different than it does today. How has your approach to the festival developed over time?

**Anna Berit Asp Christensen:** Working on this festival has been a matter of trying to set the art itself free. Back in 2007, we felt that the traditions and the codes of the music world were determining too much what kinds of pieces and productions we were receiving. We have been trying to open up to more diverse ways of understanding the scene, instead of letting this heavy, traditional way of thinking totally determine what we were going to present to our audience.

Running this festival has been a matter of changing who actually has the power to decide what is coming into the world. Anna and I have tried to address this via the format of the pieces, their framing, in the themes we focus on and in how we create meetings between the art forms. If you want to have a multi-faceted program that really shows the potential of these art forms, you really have to develop and be open to a complicated network of different power systems and habits that are often quite invisible.

For instance, it is not enough to just say that we actually need to have both female and male composers on the program in a balanced way. Instead, from the very beginning we wanted to totally open up how we are thinking about programming. This meant seeing it as an interaction between the artists, the ensembles and the guest curators that we invited in. It comes down to the question of how we know if we are presenting quality works but also how can you know if what you know is high quality? You can only do your best to create a platform for the artists and their pieces to succeed. This meant taking ourselves out of the center of power, making the festival less about programming to our tastes, because we could see that this was something that often ends up holding music back a lot of the time.

**Anne Marqvardsen:** Since we started back in 2007, the festival has always been about being very open to what is coming from the artists, from the city and from our partners. When you say it is different, perhaps what you see is just that things looked a lot different back then. The whole contemporary music scene, at least in Denmark, was still quite traditional and so was the way we thought about having a festival. In hindsight, sitting here in 2020, what we did was quite radical at that time. We simply presented a festival that was more of an open platform where artists and audience could meet and where many of these categories, traditions and hierarchies were not as present anymore.

**BF:** How has your understanding of what contemporary music is changed over the course of running the festival?

**ABAC:** From the beginning, we thought that contemporary music is as much a part of the contemporary art scene as visual arts, dance, theater, etc. This does not mean that we neglect the whole musical tradition but rather that the artists we work with often have a very open approach to other genres and to other art forms. This is also where we see many interesting meetings taking place today.

**AM:** Anna and I felt that, at least in Denmark, the contemporary music scene had this position as the little brother of the classical music scene, and that this was maybe not the best decision for this art form. Our festival is therefore a platform for contemporary art, with the main focus being on sound and music. This is also why we have always worked with both sound art and contemporary music as two equal formats that have been presented.

**BF:** How do you see SPOR in relation to other similar festivals in Europe, be it Maerzmusik, Borealis, Ultima, or Darmstadt? Do you see yourselves occupying a specific niche?

## festivals

**AM:** We all have different things that we find interesting, structures that cause us to work in specific ways, very different financial situations and different organizational sizes. While we see these other festivals as colleagues with whom we have a responsibility to share, it is not important if we look the same or if we are different but rather that the scene itself is as diverse as possible.

**ABAC:** Each music festival is unique in their own way. They also link very much to the city they take place in. Whether it be Aarhus, Oslo or Berlin, we all work with our surroundings in different ways and have different possibilities for engaging with our respective cities, which in turn shapes the festival in general.

**BF: The concept of curating has become increasingly important for contemporary music over the past ten years. How do you relate to this term in your own practice running SPOR?**

**ABAC:** The SPOR Festival format has always been closely linked to curatorial processes, no matter if it was Anne and I who were doing the major curatorial work, or if we invited in guest curators. In our experience, it has been very important to have this more open approach to letting in new people, new voices, to the organization, and into this very fragile process of creating a festival, which is so often heavily influenced by personal taste.

We have tried to experiment on the curatorial level in many ways, like having close partnerships with a single curator one year, or another year inviting a number of institutions to work with us around a series of themes. With the Sounds Now project we really wanted to focus on how to open up the field and make it more diverse. This was also seen as a good starting point for inviting people we do not know.

**AM:** When we started thinking about curatorial practice, and talking about having a curator, it was

a totally new thing in the contemporary music scene, nobody had talked or thought about it before. It was, of course, at the same time a very well-known form of collaboration in other art forms, as sometimes music can be a little bit slow and behind. Now though, the whole contemporary music scene has started to realize that curating is quite an interesting tool, and also just a fancy way of saying that you try to program in an intelligent way.

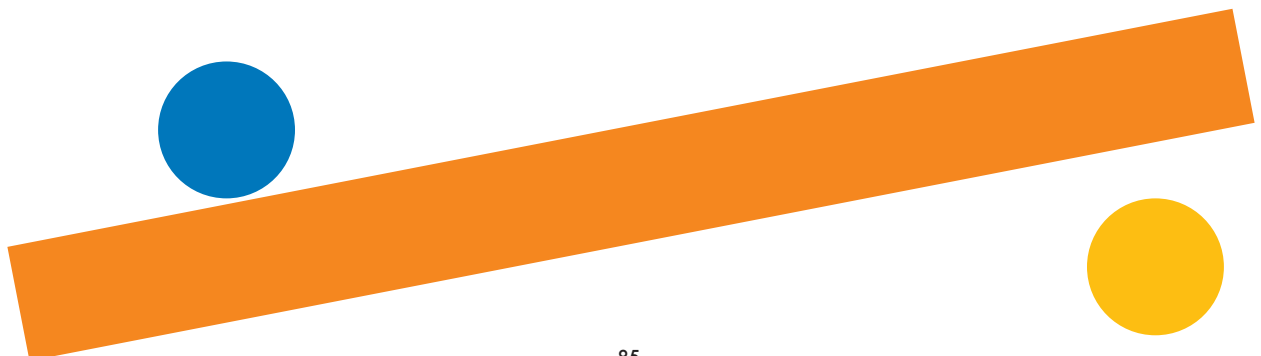
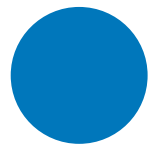
In regards to the curatorial practice of Anna and I, we not only understood it as making collaborations with others, but also as the establishment of a place for reflection in the contemporary music scene. It is about working in a thoughtful way, understanding that you need to be in dialogue with the surrounding society and that it is not enough to program just by geography or age. Ten or 15 years ago you would just have a focus on Holland, or England, for example, and you knew that the concert needed to be a certain number of minutes with a break. Everything would then just be squeezed into this very limited model.

We really wanted to reverse this trend and say that music can be a way of understanding our society and ourselves as human beings. It can be a platform for discussing topical issues, like Black Lives Matter. It is important that we start to move our art form in this direction. That does not mean that everybody has to do it but at least somebody in this music field has to give the possibility to make these kinds of works.

**ABAC:** It is also about the people who program taking on a certain new responsibility. It is not just about booking an ensemble who is touring, paying them and making a fee from this system. It is really about being responsible in the way that our art forms relate to everything else that we surround ourselves with in our daily lives. It has been important for us to say explicitly that yes, music and sound art can also be a place for this kind of reflection.

## festivals

Anna and I felt that, at least in Denmark, the contemporary music scene had this position as the little brother of the classical music scene, and that this was maybe not the best decision for this art form. Our festival is therefore a platform for contemporary art, with the main focus being on sound and music.



## festivals

**BF:** How does your commissioning process work?

**AM:** For several years we had this model where we invited a guest curator (or institution) with whom we created the program. Starting around the time Aarhus was the European Capital of Culture in 2017, we began moving away from the guest curator model and have been doing it more ourselves. This came out of the need to plan and program in a more strategic way that would allow us to build longer relationships and collaborations with institutions and other partners.

It has been interesting for us to have a new kind of flexibility, less connected to a guest curator and more to the festival and the goals we want to achieve. This has now also developed into the Sounds Now project with the EU, where it is very important for us in this four year period to take on the responsibility of figuring out how the scene can be more diverse, trying to

invent new ways of commissioning and curating that can help us open the scene to fields that are maybe not so well-represented at the moment. This is hard work but it is easier if we have the festival as its core. It is also why, instead of one guest curator, we now have 12 partners. We are all coming together to try to achieve some small new bit of self-understanding and to find new voices for this scene.

More practically, when it comes to commissioning new works, something that we do a bit differently than other festivals, is that we really like to have very long collaborations with composers. I like this very organic way of commissions being alive somehow. Perhaps it is a bit of our feminine touch but I see it as a family. I really like this beautiful way that collaborations can drift and how you do not know how it is actually going to develop. It is like a garden: You control it but you cannot always know how it will look this summer.

**ABAC:** A composer can write a beautiful string

When we started thinking about curatorial practice, and talking about having a curator, it was a totally new thing in the contemporary music scene, nobody had talked or thought about it before.

## festivals

I see a lot of composers who struggle to fit into what other festivals are demanding when they are commissioned, instead of the other way around.

quartet but they can also be curator or a very strong performer. It is also a way of acknowledging that an artist today can be many things, and that we can work with more than just one facet of their practice.

**AM:** I think a lot of composers feel that, when they work with SPOR Festival, they are very much allowed to present what they themselves want. I see a lot of composers who struggle to fit into what other festivals are demanding when they are commissioned, instead of the other way around. We, on the other hand, are more interested in what composers think is interesting, where they are in their compositional practice right now, what they want to investigate and how it could be an interesting collaboration.

**ABAC:** If it is possible within the time frame we also try to spend quite a lot of time with the composers that we commission. We work with them to ask what kind of ideas they have and how we can all work together to present these ideas in the best possible way at our festival. Artists can come up with brilliant ideas on

their own but we are more interested in how we can make it even more brilliant together.

**AM:** We have worked heavily lately with the curatorial aspect of being a festival director, which we will keep on doing. What we are bringing in with this emphasis on dialogue is something we know already from the theater world, namely working as dramaturgs. We have been occupying such a role without really knowing. Now that we have noticed we are actually doing it, we are even more active about it.

**BF:** In what areas do you see SPOR needing to further diversify itself ? What areas do you think it could really improve on?

**ABAC:** We are looking into what you could call 'expanding the family' towards other art forms and to other physical spaces. In general, what we are interested in at the moment is to go deeper and understand as a festival how we can better connect



## festivals

to more fields within the art world. Because of the pandemic, this year has been totally crazy. We cannot say what will come out of it but I think there is a growing awareness of how we can be better aware of our responsibility to be more relevant.

**AM:** Anna and I strongly believe that this scene is relevant to a much larger audience than it currently has, especially in the Nordic countries. It is very important to understand that if you want a more diverse, larger audience, what you present on stage needs to reflect the society you exist within.

Of course, this means that we are ourselves also starting to work more on what we present being more diverse. We always wanted to be a platform that was open, not judging anyone for being relevant or not, something that you can get better at all the time. It is very easy to say but not as easy to do. I think a lot of the mentality is changing in the scene right now though, and people are beginning to understand that this is very important, even if we are still at the first steps.

It is like a food chain, meaning it is not enough for just us to change. The conservatory needs to change, the school needs to change and society needs to change. We cannot do everything ourselves but we can do things together bit by bit.

**BF:** What concrete impact has the pandemic had on your organization so far?

**ABAC:** I am not sure yet. I strongly believe that people still want to go to the theater and to concerts. Maybe this will change for a certain period, but I think that this institution is very strong, having been part of our society for more than 2 500 years. The beauty of sharing life experience is the fantastic, unique quality in this art form that endures.

Another thing is that if we were a bigger team and institution, we would probably be thinking more about

digital communities and ways of presenting art. Given our size though, things like livestreaming concerts and the like will be more difficult for us to do. One project that we already started before the pandemic was about looking at how we can tell stories about this art form, looking at the creation of new works and how they come to life. This is something that we already do on digital platforms and would like to develop more, for instance by using a kind of 'digital appendix' to the festival, not to present concerts again but rather to give insight into all the different strands that come together to create a piece of music.

**AM:** We have learned in these months how to have a more flexible way of working and to be able to adapt. It has been quite wonderful to see how artists and institutions have been either forced, or just naturally flowed, into this flexibility. We have seen how we can organize a festival in new ways and change very fast. It has been quite powerful to see that this is possible.

I strongly believe that people still want to go to the theater and to concerts. Maybe this will change for a certain period, but I think that this institution is very strong, having been part of our society for more than 2 500 years.

NETWORKS

NETWORKS

NETWORKS

NETWORKS

NETWORKS

NEATWORKS

NEATWORKS

NEATWORKS

NEATWORKS

NEATWORKS

+FOLLOWUP

# UNG NORDISK MUSIK (UNM)

Collective interview by Kajsa Antonsson

**Ung Nordisk Musik (UNM)** presents works by composers, sound and performance artists, mostly under thirty years of age, from within the Nordic region. The festival is run by its respective chapters in each Nordic country. Since 1946, UNM has rotated between Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark and Iceland (joining 1974), who takes turns in hosting the festival each year. The festival started as an initiative by students at Scandinavian music conservatories frustrated with their institutions' lack of engagement for their contemporary composition programs, and for contemporary music in general. UNM provided a platform for exchanging new music composed by young people as a way of connecting the field across the neighboring countries. Over the years, UNM has established itself as an institution of its own, and continues to be run by, and a platform for, young artists. This year, UNM takes place in Tampere at the end of August as a virtual festival alongside local public events. Because of the pandemic, the chapters have been meeting more frequently in the Inter Nordic Committee (INC) to discuss alternative travel and production arrangements. This situation has forced us to revisit the core values of our organization. In light of this, the following questionnaire assembles answers from across the five different UNM chapters to create an overall picture of how we are collectively thinking about the organization, and how we relate to our legacy of support for young composers.

The umbrella organization UNM currently consists of:

**UNM Finland:** Lauri Supponen (chair), Leevi Räsänen (vice-chair), Tuomas Kettunen (treasurer), Matilda Seppälä (board member), Dante Thelestam (vice-member), Aino Tenkanen (vice-member)

**UNM Norway:** Tze Yeung Ho (chair), Ragnhild Haugland (treasurer), Viktoria Seline Stokland (board member)

**UNM Iceland:** Ragnar Árni Ólafsson (board member), Sóley Sigurjónsdóttir (board member), Pétur Eggertsson (board member), Ragnheiður Erla Björnsdóttir (board member)

**UNM Denmark:** Lauge Dideriksen (chair), Dylan Richards (vice-chair), Matias Vestergård Hansen (treasurer)

**UNM Sweden:** Kajsa Antonsson (chair), Kristin Bousard (treasurer), Olle Sundström (board member), Philip Gleisner (board member), Vanessa Massera (board member), Andrea Ek (vice-member), Arvid Kraft (vice-member)

### **Kajsa Antonsson: How does your UNM chapter work?**

**UNM Finland:** UNM Finland operates in collaboration with the UNM boards in the other Nordic countries. Their main occupation is organizing the yearly gathering of young composers and sound artists, the Ung Nordisk Musik Festival. Every year, UNM Finland organizes a call for works for the following year's festival ('out' years), and is in charge of producing the festival every 5 years ('in' years).

Work in the UNM board is divided for 2-3 people during 'out' years, and for up to 10-15 people (in 2020 when Finland is producing the festival, 3 executive producers, 1 technical producer, and 9 producers) during the 'in' year. The work is voluntary. UNM Finland pays per diems for the board members during festival weeks in 'out' years, and a small production fee for the festival production for the whole production team during the 'in' year.

Most of the work is applying for grants. Preparing the materials (budget and working plan) and adjusting them to each grant. UNM Finland is 100% funded by cultural grants during 'out' years (2016-2019), and to 95% during the 'in' year 2020. The 5% of own funding during the 'in' year comes from input by other UNM boards and ticket sales.

Diffusing the call for works to attain all potential applicants is a field of work that is in constant development. It is important to seek and find all email-lists and points of contact, in order for all potential applicants to be knowledgeable of the call.

The board is selected yearly in an annual society meeting. The invitation for the meeting is sent to members, to peer organizations (Ears Open and Tampering, and similar smaller collectives of young contemporary musicians and sound artists around the country) and posted online on UNM Finland channels.

The Finnish board of UNM had operated as an informal working group under several organizations in the past, such as the former Sibelius Academy Student Union (SAY), and since the 1990's (possibly earlier) under the young composers organization Korvat auki (Ears Open). Dante Thelestam, Lauri Supponen and Matilda Seppälä formed a registered society of this name in November 2017.

**UNM Norway:** In line with the other UNM chapters, the board of UNM Norway bears the main responsibilities of 1.) organizing and producing the Norwegian festival every five years, 2.) sending 7 works by Norway-based participants to festivals organized by the other UNM chapters. Our organization is run by volunteers, all of whom are young, practicing composers and sound artists. Similar to the protocol of volunteer organizations across the Nordic countries, the board holds an annual national general meeting every spring, an Inter-Nordic general meeting with the four other chapters, and supplements other meetings necessary for the production of the most current festival (e.g. board meetings for grant applications, selection of the jury panel, etc.). In its current state, the board has three permanent members (i.e. board chair, vice-chair/treasurer and a member-at-large).

The seven festival participants each year must reflect the proportions of male versus non-male composers in the bulk of applications that are sent to the call for works.

We are generously funded by the Norwegian Society of Composers and the Norwegian Composers' Remuneration Fund for the years which we do not hold the festival. During our festival years, we rely on additional financial sources such as the city councils' art funds, embassies, Arts Council of Norway and other Nordic funds.

**UNM Iceland:** 4 board members.

UNM Finland pays per diems for the board members during festival weeks in 'out' years, and a small production fee for the festival production for the whole production team during the 'in' year.

**UNM Denmark:** The Danish UNM chapter currently consists of three members, a chairman, a vice chairman and a treasurer. The different tasks of the organization are divided up between the three members, but all important decisions are made together. We have board meetings once every two weeks to stay updated. On 'in' years, when UNM Denmark produces the festival, the board is enlarged by several ordinary members, to help out with the greater work load.

**UNM Sweden:** UNM Sweden is a foundation (Svenska Stiftelsen Ung Nordisk Musik), and the board currently consists of seven members who attend monthly board meetings and work with the organization on a volunteer basis. The board is elected at an open, annual meeting. In similar to other chapters, UNM Sweden has previously been a matter handled by student unions within the music academies in Sweden. Since the foundation was formed, UNM Sweden is exclusively managed by its board. We work from the same rotating pattern that all boards follow: every fifth year we arrange the UNM-festival, and on 'out' years we are responsible

for everything regarding Sweden's participation in the festival, that is, sending the Swedish participants. We host the call for works and jury meeting, and do logistic work like budget planning and managing travels and accommodation for the Swedish artists in collaboration with the hosting country. We are completely reliant on cultural subsidies and do a lot of grant writing. Throughout the years UNM Sweden has launched a few side activities to the yearly festival, like a contemporary music forum in Stockholm in 2015. We get together with the other boards at least twice a year in the Inter Nordic Committee (INC), where the meeting discusses questions and topics that concern all involved countries, for example implementing gender quota in the call for works (a point brought up in 2016 and then implemented in each country's call for works), or what measures to take when producing the festival during a pandemic.

**KA: Being artists yourselves, how does your artistic practice(s) inform the organizational work you do in UNM?**

**Matias, UNM Denmark:** Only in a very general sense, and always in reference to the composers, my studies have taught me that composers and sound artists have very different ways of going about their work, and understanding the practicalities of many different work methods is invariably very helpful when putting together a festival representing such diverse kinds of music as UNM.

**Ragnheiður, UNM Iceland:** My personal experience as an artist has given me insight into the needs of the artists I work with, and a clear overview of what needs to be executed and cared for.

**Tze Yeung, UNM Norway:** This depends on which role as an artist you speak of. As an alumnus of the Norwegian Academy of Music, I have encountered the situation where projects are handed out by instructors and mentors, and therefore, the onus of logistics and funding are entirely on the school. This

## networks

practice has not informed my work in UNM. Though, as a freelance composer, most definitely: working in different organizations in Norway, organizing my own concerts and collaborating with different artists have been a mutually beneficial process when considering my work at UNM. Many logistical tasks are similar in nature between my different held positions.

**Lauri, UNM Finland:** My artistic work has influenced my work in UNM through the professional network of musicians and organizers that I've come acquainted with during my studies and work. During both 'out' and 'in' years, I've needed to recommend musicians for specific jobs and gigs at UNM festival, and my professional networks have fed into this.

Discussions on gender-issues pertaining to artistic work have taken place during my studies and work as a composer, and this has fed into inter-UNM discussions around the time UNM adopted a gender quota. Interdisciplinary work as helped me to understand the needs of interdisciplinary applicants – and in assisting them in creating documentation that is intelligible for a jury often formed of mainly musicians and contemporary classical composers.

**Kajsa, UNM Sweden:** I think our artistic practices or experiences of being artists are present above all in the questions that we ask about UNM, although we might not talk about it from that perspective very often. UNM has a sort of formula on which it builds since back in the 1900's, according to which we still work organizationally, and I often think about to what extent we, being 'artists as producers', feel free to 'tamper' with that legacy in order to make the festival into something that we wish to see in contemporary music.

**Dante, UNM Finland:** Personally, I feel that switching roles – sometimes being on-stage and sometimes working on practical production matters – gives a healthy two-way perspective to how our music culture works. Producer work teaches

respect for aspects such as economics, leadership, communication and curation. The role of the artistic side is more difficult to pin-point. Maybe the most important factor is passion? Knowledge on the diversity of artistic practices is super-important, but also an ideal which is hard to live up to. Sometimes I feel producers could use some more empathy for the socio-economic status of young artists. All-in-all, the fact that UNM is largely driven by young artists has its benefits, but also drawbacks.

**KA: UNM is a place for learning festival management that are not being taught in school. Do you agree or disagree, and why?**

**Ragnheiður, UNM Iceland:** Yes, I agree, simply because none of the tasks I do for UNM were taught in my compositional studies.

**UNM Sweden:** Yes. Although organizing of festivals and concerts is common within music and composition programs in Sweden, the scale of UNM (budget, resources and work load) is much bigger, and so the administrative responsibility. Adding to that, UNM is run on volunteer basis. Considering that the festival is both for and run by young composers and sound artists, it's an important learning platform in that it grants experiences of organizing contexts for music that revolve around works of other artists and not your own (which usually takes up focus when studying). In the sense of who attends UNM (whether as artist, festival guest or producer) the ties to music academies is also evident since the networks essentially are the same. It's necessary to be aware of UNM's situatedness and use the festival strategically.

**UNM Finland:** UNM is indeed a platform of learning by doing, although it lacks the formal nature of a school. Each board member brings their own interests and abilities into the methods of production, and indeed their capacity and time they have for the work. UNM board members often have experience in previous UNM festivals either as a participant, a concert producer or

## networks

indeed as a musician. No-one in the current board of UNM Finland has formally studied production, but all have previous experience in organizing concerts. Previous UNM Finland board members have gone on to become professional producers. Each person collects different tools from the process.

**UNM Norway:** We agree. From an earlier conversation Tze Yeung had with Norwegian Society of Composers' chairman Jørgen Karlstrøm, who has previously run UNM, "UNM is an important training ground for our future leaders in our line of work within the Nordic countries. This is likely the first time ever these young artists will receive and be responsible for an entire festival budget." Echoing Jørgen's thoughts, it is important to realize that artists in the Nordic countries rely heavily on public funding (i.e. grants from national and/or local arts councils). In contrast to North America, East Asia and parts of continental Europe, where private funding sources constitute a large percentage of festival budgets, the organizers of UNM are responsible for – basically – taxpayers' money. It is therefore an imperative that emerging artists have an understanding and are engaging with a funding system which is not about personal gain for the few, but for the benefit of the public. Throughout the organization of a UNM festival, the young artists and organizers will have to collaborate, negotiate and – at times – compromise with these public funding institutions. These institutions frequently bar students from application, and hence organizing UNM could well be an artist's first encounter in such grant applications.

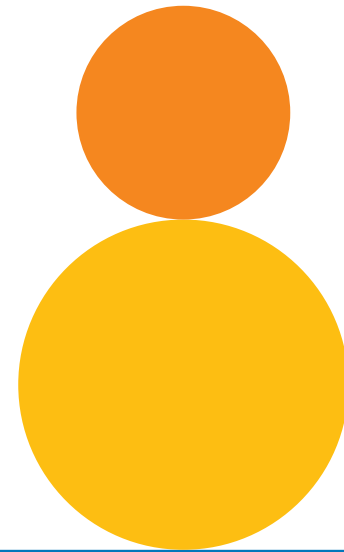
**Matias, UNM Denmark:** I don't think the main focus of UNM is learning festival management, but it is certainly an important side effect. The people choosing to join the different UNM boards are usually interested in learning what it means to have positions of authority and responsibility within the musical world, and the setting of the festival is an excellent way of getting the chance to engage with these concepts.

**KA: How important is the networking concept of the UNM festival, and how do you think about it in relation to the "Nordic focus" of UNM? Is it necessary to imagine other setups for this social exchange?**

**Matias, UNM Denmark:** Extremely important - in the years I have participated in the festivals, I have often been very surprised to see the diversity of backgrounds outside of the traditional composition classes. The Nordic countries are after all relatively small, but the cultural homogeneity of the countries is quite unique and guarantees an easy exchange of ideas - this then becomes all the more exciting because of the different backgrounds of the participating composers.

**UNM Norway:** The networking concept is an integral part of the UNM festival. As relatively small countries, our national networks of composers and musicians are limited to our immediate classmates, colleagues and teachers of our institutions. For the composers who opted to study abroad in the bachelor level, UNM is an opportunity for them to reconnect with the milieu of their home country and of their neighbors. The solidarity among neighbors is particularly important when the music scenes of each Nordic country have their own limitations due to the small population. In the recent years, the Nordic quality has also been deemphasized, as the social circumstances of the Nordic countries are constantly changing (e.g. more non-native students and young artists are settling in the region) and English has largely been the lingua franca for inter-Nordic communication. This begs the question "what truly qualifies as Nordic?"

**UNM Sweden:** The Nordic aspect of UNM has maybe moved away from a question about a musical style and closer to one of inclusion. Now the 'Nordic focus' of UNM is mostly present as a demarcation for the festival that we can ask questions about. Accessibility for instance, is a question we only just



Working in different organizations in Norway, organizing my own concerts and collaborating with different artists have been a mutually beneficial process when considering my work at UNM.

None of the tasks I do for UNM were taught in my compositional studies.



started to explore last year when the UNM-festival was held in Piteå, a far-northern region in Sweden.

**UNM Finland:** UNM is by now an old tradition. In a larger picture the festival connects to a 20th century tradition of Nordic collaboration. The festival has been successful in establishing a long-term, lasting Nordic connection for composers. UNM also operates with strong traditions and routines. It would be important to imagine other setups. One hinder is that we far too rarely have the time to discuss large questions in the Inter Nordic Committee meetings. In recent years, board meetings have sought to include time for reflection on UNM traditions and routines, and their place in the Nordic music scene. More than inter-Nordic discussions, each UNM country discusses UNM traditions and routines among themselves. This is an important base for larger discussions, but has a danger to remain local, if time is not made for inter-Nordic discussions.

**Ragnheiður, UNM Iceland:** I believe UNM's network to be an important part of the platform. But it is also something I experience to have happened

organically and without force or pretension. UNM brings young people, who are tackling similar obstacles in their career, together, and gives them an opportunity to reflect and share their experiences with each other, and therefore, grow and develop.

**Tze Yeung, UNM Norway:** Considering the concept of 'other setups', especially among Finns, the inclusion of Baltic young artists has been an ongoing discussion since the fall of the Soviet Union. Taking into account the Nordic Council's agenda of including Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in many of its activities tied to this cultural sphere, extending our collaboration with this region is perhaps something UNM could consider in the near future.

**KA: How are new forms of musical expression finding a place in the UNM festival?**

**UNM Sweden:** By attracting the people who will bring new ideas to the table. If we mainly advertise our calls for works in institutions or within privileged closed networks, our applications will reflect that. It applies to the concept of having a jury as well, and it

## networks

has been a topic of discussion in the Swedish board for a while. We host an open jury meeting to elect the jury each year. Anyone can vote. In time for the meeting we make a call for jury nominees that go out in our channels. In recent years we have been around 5-10 people present (among which board members make out the majority), meaning the ones who attend have a lot of power. The categorization of the Swedish jury, however well intended, is kind of superficial as well, 'assigning' nominees to either 'instrumental music', 'EAM' or 'performance art'. The point is to have artists with different competencies and artistic backgrounds in the jury, since they are (most often) making their choices based on aesthetic preferences.

**UNM Finland:** Once you start working for the festival, it becomes clear how organizational work has a huge impact on the contents of the festival. The wording of the call is a crucial factor in play, relating to what kind of artists apply. How the call is diffused is resting on the shoulders of the board members, their own interests and the time they have to invest in it. Although in UNM Finland the jury is not selected by the board – but by an independent selector, who in turn is selected by UNM Finland – the board recognizes their influence in which participant composers get selected. The board's information to the jury influences the jury's viewpoint about the what festival is expected to sound and look like.

A current development is the rise in the number of collective applicants. The future UNM Finland board have stated a will to take this into account in the application process, allowing group applications separately.

UNM Finland receives most of their applications in 'score and recording' format. As applications from sound and video artists, as well as performance artists have become more frequent, we have been thinking of ways to have the jury formation mirror the variety of musical expression more and more apparent among the applicants. The selector of the

jury has, in recent years, received a written wish from UNM Finland to include people able to adjudicate sound-based sound, video and performance art that does not pertain to the so-called 'music scene'.

**UNM Norway:** UNM festivals of recent years have seen an expansion of expressions and genres within its programming. From installations to site-specific compositions to performances to non-notated music, the UNM boards are extending invitations to applicants from circles outside of traditional institutions (i.e. music schools). Furthermore, this shift from purely acoustic and notated music to becoming inclusive of all genres is as well due to a generational change within the jury panels.

Most recent festivals are now implementing collaborative workshops between participants and musicians. They have often been led by professional composers engaging in experimental music. These activities have given our participants an opportunity to attempt musical experiments which are outside of the traditional settings of music making (i.e. delivering, rehearsing and then performing a work). These workshops have become a vital platform for challenging the norms of UNM and UNM Norway will continue to support their development.

**UNM Denmark:** It's very much an ongoing process, as most of the selected works still fall within a traditional musical category - the ones outside are few and far in between, and sometimes struggle to find fitting representations at the festivals. There is a very positive attitude across the five boards towards representing new kinds of musical expression, and hopefully the rise in number of new kinds of music will lead to the possibility of more legitimizing programming in the future.

**Ragnheiður, UNM Iceland:** As a musical community in whole, new forms of musical expression might well be developing, but I do not believe it is specific to UNM, but rather in all similar communities around the world.

## networks

**KA: Describe the most meaningful experience you have had at a UNM festival, and how it impacted you/your career(s).**

**Ragnheiður, UNM Iceland:** My most meaningful experience at UNM was the feedback I got after my piece was performed. I had access to multiple professional perspectives on my work, which I then used to grow as a composer and creator to focus and become better.

**Olle, UNM Sweden:** Being one of the composers with a piece in Aarhus in 2016 was just a joy - everything around the festival really. To experience the festival as a guest and the social aspect of that, etc. This was where I also got to know several of those who later became my board mates in UNM Sweden, and the request to join the board had probably not arisen if it was not for my participation in the festival that year. This is probably the clearest ripple on the water.

**Vanessa, UNM Sweden:** I mean really there are two. One: being selected for the festival in Bergen in 2018. I met quite a lot of people who later became my colleagues there. I loved it because it was just as I recently moved to Sweden, it really nourished my network-building in the Nordic region.

Many Nordic composers see UNM as a rite of passage, since composers currently in positions of power have previously taken part or are aware of the festival.

Two: Organizing the Swedish edition of the festival in Piteå in 2019. It was absolutely amazing to be active and serving this huge event, and to be part of the leadership. It was a lot of crisis management and experimentation, but the overall joy I had from it will always stay as a dear memory to me. I got to meet even more Nordic artists and discover an entirely new area of Sweden, that I didn't know was so active culturally. After the festival I was contacted by Kluster (a local organization for new music) and was programmed for a concert and a lecture at the Luleå University of Technology in the following autumn. I also developed a project for the festival that year, that will now be part of Nordic Music Days. That was a major positive for my career in the Nordic countries.

**Lauri, UNM Finland:** My experiences of working with musicians and encountering colleagues as a UNM participant 2012-2017 has led me to understand what my artistic work really is, as I've been able to contextualize it. Det Norske Solistkor performing my work in Oslo 2013 was a great professional success. Leading the festival production in 2020 has taught me a great deal about arts management.

**Dante, UNM Finland:** I remember my first UNM festival, 2014 in Malmö, as an especially pleasant experience. In later festivals I have always had organizational duties as a board member, which has taken away some of the fun. I remember Malmö having a great, thought-provoking panel of speakers invited to the festival, and that the festival had a particularly well-defined theme (Music Resistance). A strong experience like that really opens new perspectives.

**Matias, UNM Denmark:** I have had many meaningful experiences at UNM festivals, but none that have impacted my career in any very unique ways - basically just people showing interest in my music, leading to further performances.

**Tze Yeung, UNM Norway:** While I cannot quite pinpoint a single most meaningful experience within my time at UNM, the Norwegian word *dugnadsånd* describes very well why I feel engagements with UNM is valuable. I struggle to find an eloquent way to translate the word to English. In essence, it is about feeling a sense of community and working together for the community. UNM has propelled the careers of many composers in the past and many of these composers have seen this festival a springboard for exposure and a place of seeking out new opportunities. Seeing and hearing how many Nordic composers of renown still value UNM highly is a reminder that this festival is meaningful for many people. I'm not sure if being the chairman of the current UNM Norway board has directly impacted my career in significant ways at the moment. Although, it certainly has required me to make contacts and connections which are important to me on a personal level. And whether if we in the boards like to see it as such or not, this is most definitely an additional line in our CV's.

**KA: Do you feel like being part of UNM is being part of a community? Why/why not?**

**UNM Norway:** Being a part of UNM is definitely being a part of a community. The boards see each other over meetings regularly and many composers have participated in several editions of the festival. There are many familiar faces over the years. However, just like any gatherings of people, it does come with its set of problems: many Nordic composers see UNM as a rite of passage, since composers currently in positions of power have previously taken part or are aware of the festival. Thus, UNM becomes a badge for many young composers and can be understood as exclusive for those who did not have an opportunity to participate, even though they are very much within the demographics of our community profile. This is something I wish that our UNM boards will be able to address in the near future: is there an alternative option to the jurying process we have today? How can we remove the competitive nature

In the years I have participated in the festivals, I have often been very surprised to see the diversity of backgrounds outside of the traditional composition classes.

of the jurying process? How can we include artists who feel excluded on the basis of UNM's history and focus on specific genres?

**UNM Denmark:** Yes, there is quite a specific spirit in taking part in UNM. The fact that it is organized not by professionals, but by people who are very much at the same level as the participant composers makes it a very unique kind of community. It becomes quite apparent for everyone how easy it actually is to make a change, because of all the transparency inherent in how the festivals are run as they happen.

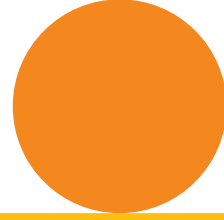
**Ragnheiður, UNM Iceland:** Yes, I do feel so because at the festival (and working with other board members) you make friendships and humble connections with like-minded people.

**UNM Finland:** UNM is a community. Both one that is temporarily formed at the festival through participants' common experiences, as well something more lingering: UNM is like a secret handshake among many alumni of UNM festivals. Alumni share their experiences at the UNM festival when encountering other alumni. This forms of a community in reminiscence.

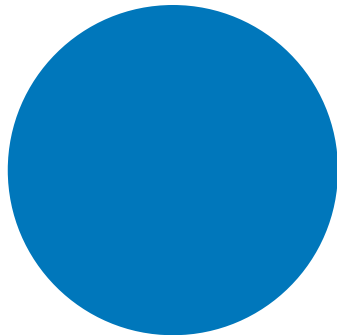
**UNM Sweden:** Yes, although the concrete experiences of belonging to a UNM community differs within the Swedish board, as some have been working with UNM for a few years and others a few months. Not everyone has been at the festival either. Since UNM Sweden is also quite a large board in comparison to the other countries, not everyone attends the Inter Nordic Committee (INC) meetings that undeniably ties the different UNM chapters together.

**Vanessa, UNM Sweden:** It absolutely is. It's very much a Nordic Countries community. There is a network. The thing is, the community can be pretty scattered when it's not during festival events. Also, board work is unpaid, so it makes it hard to prioritize for a lot of people. So, the team can be reduced at times, and I feel we really get together during festivals. It's nice to be able to follow each other's projects on social media and such, but we definitely could have more follow-up when it comes to maintaining the festival community. We are supporting emerging artists, who don't always know how to keep their networks alive after an event or use them relevantly. There definitely would be room for progress on that front.

**Tze Yeung, UNM Norway:** Personally, as the only person of color within the UNM boards, the historically homogeneous community can sometimes feel like an alienating factor. I have to obscure a part of my identity in order to fit in, since there has been no precedence for UNM leadership with cultural minority backgrounds. I believe that UNM's responsibilities in community building must continue to tackle questions of including people of different identities and socio-economic backgrounds.



UNM's responsibilities in community building must continue to tackle questions of including people of different identities and socio-economic backgrounds.



---

FOLLOW UP SECOND EDITION

with UNM by Vanessa Massera

**Vanessa Massera:** How have your networking and community activities been impacted by the pandemic?

**Tze Yeung Ho, UNM Norway:** The travel restrictions imposed during the pandemic greatly affected the mobility of our participants and board members in attending the festival in Tampere, Finland. Our regular Inter-Nordic board meetings and organisational work were replaced by online platforms.

**Sóley Sigurjónsdóttir and Pétur Eggertsson, UNM Iceland:** We have of course been unable to host many formal gatherings but we were able to host a concert last summer since restrictions were down in Iceland then. The usual “chatting at random” at various events has of course not happened. We have tried to be more active online and keep in touch with composers and artists who have already taken part in UNM but reaching out to new candidates has been minimal.

**Kajsa Antonsson, UNM Sweden:** Based on the experiences from the 2020 festival specifically, creating a sense of community among the participating composers across the different countries was difficult. In Sweden we hosted a closed streaming event in Stockholm where 5 out of 7 composers from the Swedish delegation gathered, together with three board members. Even if none of the Swedish participants had prior experience of the UNM festival, they do have experiences of festivals in general being social events and it was apparent that being restricted to digital ways of communicating with the rest of the festival community (live streaming the concerts, doing video calls and chatting on Discord) felt strange and inadequate.

**VM:** Was your UNM chapter able to support new forms of musical expressions, gender equality, or cultural diversity during the pandemic? Has it had to change strategies?

**UNM Norway:** As we are starting to plan our upcoming festival in 2023, our board has continued to focus on the issue of representation. Our board members are committed to taking action on broadening gender representation among our selected participants and, additionally, we have spearheaded an initiative to invite Baltic participants to our festival. In UNM Norway’s board discussions, we have reflected on the issue of prestige in the context of the UNM festival. Despite the increase of collaborations with young performers and artists in recent years, the tendency to affiliate with professional ensembles remained an important practice. This model begs the question: is UNM a platform to connect young artists across practices or is UNM a platform to connect emerging content-creating artists to professional performers and groups? Naturally, working with established groups has come with financial responsibilities and has affected the demographics of potential applicants. Navigating with these two factors in mind can contribute to a change of direction and strategy in future UNM festivals. In the current model, economical sustainability and a similar demographic may be seen as hindrances to the elevation of our festival.

**UNM Iceland:** We always do our best to support all forms of music across all genders and ethnicities. We have perhaps focused more on internal strategies for coming events this past year instead of direct support but we always work on our goal to make UNM as widespread within the community as possible. When it comes to new forms of musical expression, we did work towards new methods in collaboration with our selected participants for 2020. The composers had new works that were premiered in the summer, recorded by a young professional team and published once a week prior to the festival. One composer

## networks

(Pétur Eggertsson) made use of this online platform as a medium by developing a piece that was both a live performance and an online video game.

**UNM Sweden:** I am not sure we did. Besides handling administrative matters such as allocating travel funding to go into the virtual festival and arranging and hosting the local streaming event in Stockholm, I think we went about our work as we usually do. In the past couple of years, UNM Sweden has seen a decrease in non-cis-male applicants in our call for works. We apply a gender quota to our (otherwise anonymous) call. Not only has it in recent years been necessary to use that quota, but the pool of works from which we can allocate has also become considerably smaller. The suggestion to use gender quotas within each board's call for works came from UNM Sweden in 2016. At the time the board had members who were also working on promoting and supporting non-cis-male artists through a different Swedish network (Konstmusiksystrar) and therefore they were doing extensive outreach work. The people who came in contact with Konstmusiksystrar automatically got to know about UNM as well and there was a big increase in women applying to the festival. This sort of outreach work is not being done at the moment and I think we have ignored the fact that it is something that needs to be a continuous practice for too long. The default channels for our calls are still spaces where cis-men are in the majority (composition programs). We have had the realisation that we need to change strategies. The pandemic played a part in that, but mainly it is an essential step in the overall trajectory of UNM being an inclusive platform for young sound-based artists.

**VM: What is the main issue you had to face during this pandemic and how did you approach it as an organiser?**

**UNM Norway:** The personal safety of the participants and the individual right to travel were

contentious discussions during the pandemic. In UNM Finland's 2020 festival, the issue of international participants traveling to the festival was fervently debated among the five boards. Each country faced varying challenges under different funding infrastructures. While some boards ultimately left the decision of travel to the individual participant's discretion, others took the authority to restrict travel on the grounds of protecting both our participants and the Finnish performers' personal health and safety. All UNM chapters have tackled this challenge with different solutions. UNM Norway chose to restrict international travel and arranged a mini-festival where UNM participants in Oslo gathered at NOTAM (the Norwegian Centre of Technology of Art and Music) to partake in the digital streaming of concerts and lectures under safe conditions. The digital social gatherings between all countries have played an important role in keeping the networking element of our festival alive. Organisational work among the boards has also taken a toll without

**We have had the realisation that we need to change strategies. The pandemic played a part in that, but mainly it is an essential step in the overall trajectory of UNM being an inclusive platform for young sound-based artists.**

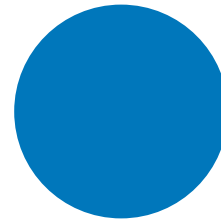
physical meetings. The boards decided to split into online working groups focusing on specific pursuits.

**UNM Iceland:** One of the main issues that affected us was that only some of the Icelandic participants could travel to the festival. Eventually, this problem was only minor, thanks to UNM Finland's very professional approach to moving the festival's concerts and social gatherings to online platforms. Also, in the past three years UNM Iceland has organized a concert in Reykjavik where the selected composers for UNM of that year could present their works. This year it was unclear for a long time if we could have a live concert, and therefore we came up with another plan. Luckily we were able to follow through with both of them. The concert took place with a limited audience and the program was recorded by a team of young professionals. Every week after the concert and until the UNM festival we published a video of the performance along with short interviews by their creators.

**UNM Sweden:** Our main issue was creating a sense of community. I think we tried to approach it by hosting the local streaming events, as well as trying to get the communication going digitally across the countries during the festival but I'm not sure we were successful.

**VM: What is a solution or a new strategy your chapter has come up this year that gives you hope for the future?**

**UNM Norway:** We are positive about deepening the discussion of 'prestige' within a contemporary music festival context. In our upcoming festival we are eager to re-evaluate the role of our institution to better suit and represent the demographics of young artists in the Nordic and Baltic regions. The concrete actions are yet to be determined, as our team for festival production has just been selected, but this uncertainty keeps us hopeful and excited to see what more we can achieve.



We are creating a new platform in the form of collaborative meetings and events between UNM and various other music and art grassroots organizations with the goal of reaching out and spreading knowledge and information.

## networks

**UNM Iceland:** We are creating a new platform in the form of collaborative meetings and events between UNM and various other music and art grassroots organizations with the goal of reaching out and spreading knowledge and information. We are hopeful that this will lead to more diverse participation in future UNM events.

**UNM Sweden:** I am not sure I would call it a strategy but we have recently changed our board, which has brought new energy and new perspectives.

### **VM: What are your objectives for the future and how will you reach them?**

**UNM Norway:** We are looking forward to officially welcoming our new Norwegian board which will be tasked with the production of our upcoming festival in 2023. In the course of the next two years the old and the new boards will work together, reflecting on the lessons we learned from the pandemic and recent trends, to create an inclusive, open and inviting festival that showcases the works of young artists affiliated to Northern Europe.

**UNM Iceland:** Following up from the collaborative meetings, we are working towards making UNM 2022 Reykjavik a festival that considers a broader range of musical practitioners. We hope to reach this goal by involving more partners in the discussion of making the festival, changing the open call and who can apply to it, adding an artist residency before the festival that we hope gives space for different types of musical practitioners to take part in the festival and hiring four mentors of diverse backgrounds to select these participants and encourage discussion during the creative process.

**UNM Sweden:** For UNM Sweden, learning how to have a more functional structure within the board is one objective, we will reach it through fearless culture management!

**UNM Norway:** I think that the pandemic has brought some fundamental questions about UNM to the forefront: why do we arrange this festival? Whom does this festival serve? Until the Covid-restrictions became a stark reality, UNM's annual presence was taken for granted by many of our generation's Nordic young composers and sound artists, myself included. The festival was running in its expected guise for decades and it could be assumed to unquestionably continue in a clockwork-fashion because of our region's economical stability and social progress. The pandemic has brought much of this stability and progress to a halt, as many artists are now reconsidering their careers facing a lack of opportunities and prospects. We have not realised the precarity of artistic institutions, particularly those that are successfully run by volunteers in times of peace and stability. Thinking back to UNM's conception in the post-Second World War era, the festival was founded on the ideas of trust, neighbourliness and curiosity by composers of the time. What of these original concepts remain today and what do we bring forward from this point?

+FOLLOWUP

# MARTA FORSBERG & ADELE KOSMAN (KONSTMUSIKSYSTRAR)

interviewed by Anna Jakobsson

## BIO

---

**Marta Forsberg** is a composer and the co-founder of Konstmusiksystrar (Sisters in Contemporary Music). Forsberg is from Härnösand in northern Sweden and is based in Berlin.

**Adele Kosman** is a composer and singer based in Stockholm. She has been a board member of Konstmusiksystrar since 2019.

**Anna Jakobsson** has worked as a creative producer for Konstmusiksystrar since 2017.

**Anna Jakobsson:** **Approximately how many people are part of Konstmusiksyrstrar?**

**Marta Forsberg:** Today Konstmusiksyrstrar consists of 165 members, most of them are based in Sweden but also in the other Nordic countries and Europe. All members are presented on our website. We were originally only about 20 people who were part of an email chain and the initiative has kept growing since then. The fact that we have so many members tied to the network gives us both legacy and agency when speaking to people in power positions within the music industry.

**AJ:** **Who can become a member?**

**MF:** Composers, sound artists and musicians who identify as female, trans or non-binary. When we founded Konstmusiksyrstrar there were other feminist initiatives in Sweden but they were more focused on the established contemporary music scene which we could not identify with. We also discovered that most of those organisations required that their members had an academic degree from a music academy. So we decided to form our own initiative that could include the younger and growing underground scene.

**AJ:** **Can you talk more about the founding of Konstmusiksyrstrar?**

**MF:** I founded Konstmusiksyrstrar together with Lo Kristenson in 2014. We were both composition students at the Royal College of Music in Stockholm and organised the Young Nordic Music Days (UNM) festival in Malmö. UNM is a yearly festival for young composers, sound artists and performance artists living in Scandinavia. We were struck by the fact that out of 35 invited composers, only 6 were women. During the festival, there was an open discussion as part of a panel on feminism. Suddenly during the discussion, an audience member stood up and said that he did not understand why we were discussing feminism, that it was a non-issue and that equality was

not a problem in the contemporary music scene. A woman sitting in the panel responded, “look around this room, of course there is a problem with equality in our scene!”. Only a couple of other participants joined in opposing him. The rest were quiet.

The established contemporary music scene offered no real platform for young composers. We were tired of being in an environment where the spaces for the younger generation were narrow, difficult to navigate and not very friendly. We felt that the debate, as well as the contemporary music scene, was segregated, hierarchical and without any sincere desire to work together towards a freer and more innovative climate. Our experiences at the festival made us realise the urgency of these issues and we decided to form Konstmusiksyrstrar.

**AJ:** **You have been engaged with gender equality work for most of your adult life. What kind of developments can you see within the contemporary music scene?**

**MF:** When I started my studies at The Royal College of Music in 2013 my friends and later colleagues, Sara Parkman and Hampus Norén, had already formed a study group for norm-critical thinking and pedagogy called “Normkritiska gruppen”. They invited people with knowledge of feminism and issues of race who held workshops with us. The college management supported this initiative and I kind of took it for granted that these kinds of ideas were normal praxis within all higher education institutions. When I later travelled abroad, or just outside of Stockholm really, I realised that I had been living in my own little bubble. The awareness was much lower and gender balance within contemporary music was often spoken about as a non-issue, like at UNM. Nothing was happening within conservatories and certainly not within the orchestral institutions. Today I think that we have reached a point where this is slowly changing, also outside Sweden. Feminism is expected to be on the agenda when you talk about programming, for instance.

**AJ:** How would you say that the pressure for gender equality in music that the Swedish government started in 2007 has affected the repertoire?

**MF:** Konstmusiksyrar has often been critical towards the different motivations for working with gender equality and the kind of box ticking and quick fixes that this policy has resulted in. For example, this has sometimes been a problem when we have collaborated with big institutions and we have questioned their incitement for working with us. There has been a lot of focus on numbers, but less attention paid to the hierarchal and oppressive system that we are navigating within. On the whole, I think it is an amazing initiative that has led to deep on-going changes within the contemporary music scene. I think it has opened new ideas and initiatives which focus more on the big picture and less on square numbers. In 2018-2019, Konstmusiksyrar conducted the preliminary study *I slumpens tjänst* (In the service of chance) about programming in new music. We collaborated with organisers and ensembles to use chance and randomization as thought experiments for highlighting habitual behaviours in programming. Obviously, this kind of progressive project would never have been realised if it were not for several other initiatives working to improve the gender balance over an extensive period of time.

**AJ:** What should contemporary music do in order to gain more relevance in the rest of the society?

**MF:** I believe that the fact that we are not trained to ask questions as part of our practices is something that affects the whole contemporary music scene in a negative way. Nobody is asking why you did it the way you did. In the contemporary arts field, on the other hand, this is really ingrained in the education and discourse around art. As music students, we are not given any tools to do this. Rather, we are encouraged to not pay any attention at all to these

The established contemporary music scene offered no real platform for young composers. We were tired of being in an environment where the spaces for the younger generation were narrow, difficult to navigate and not very friendly.

## networks

questions. Instead of keeping them rattling around the back of our heads, we should let our questions lead the way. We have to let go of the idea that everything has to be so clever all the time. It could be really banal things that influence you at the moment, and that is totally fine, if not great! I think this shift of attitude could open the contemporary music scene up to more people as well.

**AJ: What has been the most fun part of working with Konstmusiksyrar?**

**MF:** The most rewarding thing has been being together and to form non-competitive relationships with professionals in the contemporary music field.

**AJ: ...and the most challenging?**

**MF:** The struggle, even though it is a cliché, is to be part of and work within an association. Even though it is amazing at times, it a challenge to collaborate and make everyone feel included. To work with gender equality drains a lot of energy. Many have worked their asses off for Konstmusiksyrar without feeling appreciated.

When we started this work, we were a little naive in the sense that we did not realise how hard it would be. I think that if you are activist that works with gay rights, let's say, you are prepared for it to be hard and even potentially violent. I think it took us a lot of time to figure out all the different power relationships within the industry. In the beginning, we could not understand how people could say something positive about our work but then ignore structural problems within their own organisations. It is really hard to navigate different contexts when so much is taking place under the surface. It can make you feel a bit crazy and it is easy to doubt yourself. It is very important to look after yourself and those around you, in order to stay sane.

**AJ: Adele, when did you first hear about Konstmusiksyrar?**

**Adele Kosman:** When I started studying at the Royal College of Music in 2017 the name was circulating. Eventually, I filled out the form on the website and became a member. Gradually, the network has started to take up more of my time and consciousness. In September 2019, I was asked to do a workshop for Konstmusiksyrar at the Stockholm Fringe Festival. Then I moved to Berlin to do an exchange and met Marta and the composer Kajsa Antonsson, who were both based there at the time.


**AJ: What made you interested in Konstmusiksyrar's work?**

**AK:** I had previously been part of other separatist initiatives for women in music, mainly working within commercial music. What stood out with Konstmusiksyrar, compared to my earlier experiences, was the depth of the feminist analysis. Other networks I have worked with have often focused on success and how more female musicians should make it to the top, while paying less attention to questioning the capitalist values in music, or to examining the working conditions for women and transgender sound artists. Konstmusiksyrar is working towards dismantling the system and creating easier paths for the future, which is more in line with my personal beliefs.

**AJ: How would you describe the organisational structure of your network? How do you communicate?**

**AK:** The Konstmusiksyrar board consist of 7 people. We communicate mostly online, since everyone is spread out in different parts of Sweden. Every month we have meetings where we go through our ongoing projects and other, more structural initiatives that we are working with. A few times a year we send a newsletter to all members on "The List," where activities and call for works are announced. Konstmusiksyrar are also active on social media (Instagram and Facebook) to communicate with people outside of the network.

If it was easier to listen to and  
access contemporary music,  
without a set context and  
explanations that are often



standardized, perhaps the leap  
between different genres would  
not be as big and contemporary  
music could reach out more.



**AJ: What projects are you working on at the moment?**

**AK:** I just started working on a new project called *Sound Pals*, which is about composing together at a distance and involves various networks similar to ours in different countries. Composers from different networks will be paired together and then do a one-year-long collaborative exchange where they will share musical pieces and recordings between each other. The different compositions will eventually be presented in the form of a soundscape.

**AJ: What should the contemporary music scene do in order to gain more relevance in the rest of the society?**

**AK:** It just baffles me how little relevance contemporary music has, it really does not make sense. One answer could be to increase the diversity of the people making music. If there were more active female composers it would engage a larger number of the female and fem population but this is more of a long-term goal. There was a shift in the 1970's and 1980's when alternative music was left behind and the alternative and radical political movement took different paths. Before this they were really intertwined but during my upbringing I have seen more radical political movements embracing pop anthems instead of engaging contemporary musicians and composers. I do not know how we should go about trying to intertwine the two again but that is of course what I would like to see.

I would also like to see a greater variation in music, both contemporary and commercial. Sometimes I feel that there is a lack of "music for listening" in contemporary music. A music that would cater more to a listener's needs. There is plenty of contemporary music that benefits from being performed live and less that you would enjoy more if you listen to it recorded. The listening quality of music has always been important to me, possibly because of my background

in pop music. If it was easier to listen to and access contemporary music, without a set context and explanations that are often standardized, perhaps the leap between different genres would not be as big and contemporary music could reach out more.

It just baffles me  
how little relevance  
contemporary music  
has, it really does  
not make sense.



---

FOLLOW UP SECOND EDITION

with Adele Kosman by Anna Jakobsson

**Anna Jakobsson: What do you think of livestreaming as a medium for presenting contemporary music?**

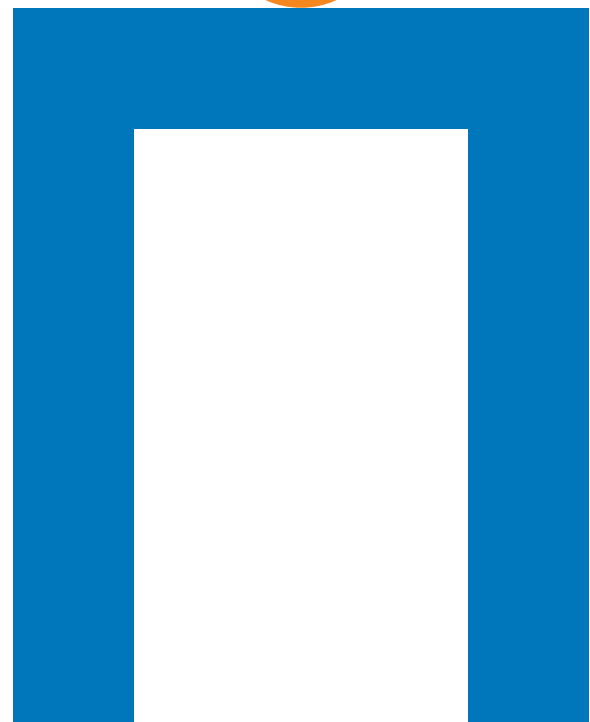
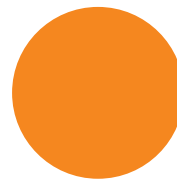
Adele Kosman: I do not share the enthusiasm many show towards this digital development in new music. For some it seems to improve accessibility and this I strongly disagree with. As a recent composition graduate, this should be a time when I am engaged in the scene and take part in other people's work as well as sharing my own new material. Unfortunately, this is not the case. From my experience, livestreams are not engaging. The lack of technical knowledge and resources is too big to make something of value using livestream, or rather - to transmit the values of the music and performance across the screen to an audience. I have tried numerous times to engage with live streamed performances but now I have simply just decided not to do it anymore.

**AJ: Is this experience something that you share with others in the industry?**

AK: I guess that I am in a minority as to the extent of pessimism that I display. But I am certainly not alone. Many would perhaps not criticise livestreaming concerts in general but they would also not watch them. And if it is not watched then what is the value of it? If I think about what I would get from a live concert, almost nothing of it is transmitted to me online. Considering the vast amount of content online, developed specifically to fit online formats, it is hard to see how contemporary music could compete, having been written and crafted for live performance. It all seems a bit pointless having all of that work end up on a pile on a server among the rest of piles on servers.

**AJ: What kind of adjustments would you like to see in order to adapt the digital formats to the live experiences?**

AK: To start with, asking an audience for commitment is very important, like airing the performance live at a published time and not letting the content sit online forever. Perhaps that will result in fewer viewings over time but it will also make the audience more engaged. Secondly, the circumstances of concerts during the pandemic needs to thoroughly affect the working process of the music that is shared in these new formats. How can one mould the material to benefit from the digital format and vice versa? This, to me, is the vital part, sharing the music must serve the work to a greater extent for the live streamed contemporary music to survive and thrive.



Many would perhaps not criticise  
livestreaming concerts in general but  
they would also not watch them.  
And if it is not watched then what  
is the value of it?

# PAULINE HOGSTRAND (DAMKAPELLET)

interviewed by **Anna Jakobsson**

## BIO

---

**Pauline Hogstrand** is a Swedish violist and composer based in Copenhagen. She is one of the producers of the female musicians' collective Damkapellet.

## networks

**Anna Jakobsson:** Approximately how many people are part of the network?

**Pauline Hogstrand:** We have around 20 members, where some are inactive for periods of time. For the time being, there are approximately 15 active members, who are participating in almost everything that we do.

**AJ:** Who can become a member?

**PH:** You would have to be a woman, transgender or a non-binary person, that is one of the main requirements. Right now, Damkapellet basically consists of a group of friends. Mika Persdotter, the initiative-taker for Damkapellet, initially gathered people that she thought would be interested in this kind of work. Most of these musicians are still in the ensemble, and then we have added people that we thought would make be a good supplement. To be a member of Damkapellet you must be in some way interested in working in an organisation towards a non-hierarchical structure. We cannot bring in people from the outside who are not willing to follow this, then the structure will not work.

**AJ:** How was the network founded?

**PH:** Violist Mika Persdotter originally had an idea about creating an orchestra which only would perform music by female composers. During her studies in Copenhagen she had only played repertoire written by women on a few occasions, something that many classically trained musicians can relate to. Since the group was formed on friendship relations, we ended up with unproportioned instrument sections. In the beginning the ensemble only consisted of strings, but with very few violins, lots of viola players and a couple of cellists and double basses. The first time we met, we had no idea of how to approach the concept of non-hierarchical leadership. Even Mika experienced that it was difficult to articulate what we were meant to do together, since that could also be a potential risk

of making decisions about one another. Everybody waited to get impulses from each other, and were careful not to dominate the atmosphere. This kind of situation can indeed be terrifying for many, and it was absolutely confusing and uncomfortable for us too. But if you want to discover something new, you also need courage to let the space be empty, to experience the fine nuances of each individual just being in the moment. And from this, it is possible to be responsible about what you can contribute with, instead of fearing a lack of control.

**AJ:** How would you describe the organisational structure of your network? How do you communicate?

**PH:** Initially, we created an administrative core consisting of seven people. At that time the seven of us were all spread out in Norway, Sweden and Denmark, which made it difficult to communicate. Nowadays most of us are based in Malmö or Copenhagen, which makes it easier. This year we decided to try a different structure where 3-4 people are in the production team together in a yearly rotation. These positions will rotate between members not only for handling the workload, but also for sharing ownership over the collective. We work in Google Drive where we have an information bank about fundraising, PR, project descriptions, and a shared calendar and everybody can see what material we are working with at the moment. We also have an internal Facebook group where we ask about interest for different projects, and where people can send their feedback and inputs. It can be messy sometimes, but in general I think we just have to accept that we are constantly changing and reevaluating our methods and that is also a part of the experiment of finding our way.

**AJ:** What is the goal of your network? How do you work to reach that goal?

**PH:** I think it is difficult to talk about a goal for the group as a whole. On a personal level, I am curious

## networks

to see how far we can expand within the music but also in co-existing as a collective. Last year, I started to spend time with horses again after many years' break, and being with them has really impacted my way of looking at group dynamics. I am currently working on a potential structural change for the ensemble, inspired by the dynamics of horse herds. Individuals lead the group at different times, where the person with the highest competence takes the initiative and the other members place themselves where they should be, so that this individual can come forward. Roles rotate and are not always performed by the same individuals, so that one person does not firmly hold a position just because it was decided once. When we play together we are all participating on the same ground, and everybody show up with their full responsibility. It would be really interesting to see what it does to us as a collective if this way of thinking and doing was also integrated into our organisational work. What if this is something that could be part of everything that we do? This could potentially help us open up even more in our music.

### **AJ: Describe the most meaningful experience you have had working with your network.**

**PH:** There is one experience from our last annual meeting in 2019 which I remember strongly. We were in the middle of organising a festival which we have done every year for International Women's Day since 2017. We were in a kind of stressful situation and realised that everybody had to help out in order to make it happen. We ended up deciding that we would just share all the tasks between us. Everybody just had to trust that the different tasks were done by the right persons and in a way that was good for the group. The fact that we all were responsible for producing the festival really affected the group dynamics when we were performing. We were all just throwing ourselves out there, but doing it fully together, knowing we had each other's backs.

### **AJ: How does your network contribute to a**

### **more diverse contemporary music scene?**

**PH:** Firstly by presenting music by female, transgender and non-binary composers but also, as an ensemble displaying diversity, providing an example of how you can work together in a different way. This is quite obvious to people when we perform, they feel that the atmosphere is different and that we communicate in a different way. We should not strive to be the same or to think the same, because this limits our options both as individuals but also as a group. I think we are really unused to this feeling that it is not only about me. When there is no competition to fight for it starts to become about the whole picture. We show that it is possible to have a musical family, in which we grow together.

### **AJ: What are the biggest challenges that your network is facing?**

**PH:** I think that the biggest challenge is to all the time be confronted with your own expectations or ideas about yourself and other people, which are coloured by culture and previous experiences. It is difficult to know if you make a choice because it makes you feel more creative or empathic, or if it is something you do by habit, because you do not know anything else. We have been struggling with the heritage of learning from the master. Often when someone does something everyone agrees, because it is easiest and it is so important for us to feel that we belong in the group. We have had meetings and playing sessions where this behaviour has created a kind of stagnation. We have chosen not have a formal leader, which means that everybody has to take responsibility for making decisions but without dominating the group. This of course demands a lot from the initiative-taker of the project but also from those participating who actively need to take a more critical role, and understand that they are in a process of finding this whole system out.



We have been struggling  
with the heritage of learning  
from the master. Often when  
someone does something  
everyone agrees, because it  
is easiest.

## networks

### **AJ: What do your members need the most?**

**PH:** To feel ownership and trust themselves but at the same time to trust the group. Trust that the work has a direction even though you cannot see it. Trust the stillness because it does not mean that things are standing still. It can be very useful to find out how to make different tasks valuable to yourself. It is not only something that you do because you have to, but something that you can enjoy developing with. Different motivations can of course also be a sensitive subject. For example, if someone volunteers to be the contact for venues, partly because they want to fill their own address book with important contacts, it can create competition in the group. In some ways, we have been able to talk about this but there is still a lot of work to do in this area. The most important thing is transparency, that everyone can access the same information and that we share the work that we do with each other.

### **AJ: What should the contemporary music scene do in order to gain more relevance to the rest of society?**

**PH:** For one thing, it is about the composers but also about the ensembles presenting music in a way where we consciously think about how we are and how we want to communicate with the audiences. For example, we are doing some compositions by and with Lo Kristenson where we are experimenting together on creating a non-hierarchical sounding structure, also in the music. It is a live experiment, and a collaborative performance with other groups. If you find the right frame, I think that any music will be approachable for anyone.

### **AJ: What are you working on at the moment?**

**PH:** In 2020 we have a yearlong residency at the venue Koncertkirken in Copenhagen. In addition to concerts and festivals, we also organise a conversation- and educational event called *Another*

*Composer Coffee*. The last Sunday every month we invite composers to talk about their various works in a relaxed atmosphere with a lot of coffee drinking. Right now, we are having summer camp at the same venue, recording new music that we commissioned for this year's program.

When there is no competition to fight for it starts to



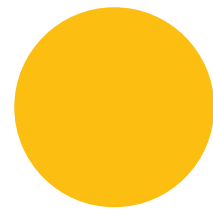
to become about the whole picture.



We show that it is possible to have



*a musical family, in which we grow together.*



# MARCELA LUCATELLI (SKLASH+)

interviewed by **Anna Jakobsson**

## BIO

---

**Marcela Lucatelli** is a composer and vocal performer, and the initiative taker of SKLASH+. Lucatelli is from São Paulo and is based in Copenhagen.

## networks

**Anna Jakobsson: What does SKLASH+ stand for?**

**Marcela Lucatelli:** SKLASH + is the acronym for Samtids-Kvindelige Lydskaberes Atrium for Samtale og Holocænstudier (Contemporary Female Sound Artists' Atrium for Conversation and Holocene Studies). The plus sign is an invitation to the female-identifying, non-binary and the LGBTQ + community. The word Holocene comes from Greek and means "entirely new epoch" (from holos 'whole' and kainos new). An atrium is an open, outdoor space in the form of a courtyard, around which a house is built. An atrium is also the chamber or one of the chambers of the heart that receives blood from the veins and forces it into the ventricle or ventricles. In the atrium, the heart's electrical signal is generated, which will be able to pump blood to the lungs and body after the ventricle, thus completing the heartbeat.

**AJ: Approximately how many people are part of the network?**

**ML:** There are currently 15 people in our email chain. We reached out the Danish Composer's Society, the Royal Danish Academy of Music and the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, so most of the people are in some way tied to these intuitions.

**AJ: Who can become a member?**

**ML:** Anyone who marginally fits! Sometimes angry people, mainly older men, write upset things to me on my Facebook wall or in other social media. Then I feel an urge to invite them to join, because they are probably the ones who need it the most. But in general, SKLASH + is a platform for female, female-identifying and non-binary sound artists.

**AJ: How was your network founded?**

**ML:** I have not really thought of it as a network previously, more like a platform or a device for

change. I took the initiative to form SKLASH+ earlier this year, because of the lack of a space where female, female-identifying and non-binary sound artists could meet, share their experiences and establish new strategies for necessary innovations in music and society. We often get limited space at concerts and festivals, in the sense that there are usually maximum 1-2 female artists on an evening program. This makes it hard for us to get to know each other and talk. It is really unfortunate, because we often have a lot in common and have experienced similar things. So it was primarily this super basic fact that made me take initiative to this kind of network.

On a more philosophical level, it was important for me that our undertaking would not be limited to discussing matters of contemporary music, but also reach the society as a whole. There is a gap between recent queer and feminist theory and the field we are working in. I think there is a great need for a platform where these different forms of knowledge can be combined. Female-identified, trans and non-binary people need to be represented in public spaces and speak up about all the issues and perspectives in their own fields that are generally not being covered. This is urgent for us as living beings as well as for collectively getting rid of the traditionally segregating definition of 'humanity,' basically.

**AJ: How would you describe the organisational structure of your network?**

**ML:** We communicate mainly via email and have an email chain where we can exchange ideas and tip with each other about calls for works and other opportunities. We also schedule meetings and organise talks and concerts, in line with individual suggestions and general interest. We have received some funding from the Danish Composer's Society for organising live events that address relevant issues for us, and which we would furthermore like to open up for an ongoing dialog with our global-local environment. Since the initiative is still so fresh, we are not sure which direction it will take.

In a way, I stand quite alone for SKLASH+'s concept as an instigator, but I see it also as my mission here per se. I believe younger composers in Denmark are mostly too busy with the challenges of their individual careers to engage more in collective movements. Capitalism has transformed music into the art of solitary individuality. I am from Brazil where there is a much stronger urge for some kind of community. The conditions for artists are so bad that you have to help and support each other somehow in order to survive. It is different here in Denmark. There is not really a vibrant tradition of gathering outside the institutions for more creative purposes. The one-to-one relationship between the state and the individual artist is too strong, because of constant applications for grants, commissions, etc., which makes this work challenging.

**AJ: What is the goal of your network? How do you work to reach that goal?**

**ML:** Our goal is to meet, exchange and spread knowledge from female-identified and non-binary perspectives within sonic and life practices, attentive to cultural minorities and questions of race. We want to share this suppressed information both internally as well as reaching out to a wider segment of the public. We work towards this by building different communication platforms so we can meet among ourselves and with different groups and audiences. It is important for me not to narrow things down too much, because then things easily can get too elitist. So, I always try to keep an eye on the rest of the society and build bridges between different disciplines and people.

**AJ: What is the most meaningful experience you have had working with your network?**

**ML:** We had a great first meeting where we staged an unannounced 'occupation' of a Danish Composers' Society organisational meeting and presented some of our challenges. The network is very new, but I

There is a gap between recent queer and feminist theory and the field we are working in. I think there is a great need for a platform where these different forms of knowledge can be combined.

believe that the fruitful meeting between generations that is provided by the network's frame is something which can potentially impact our careers. There is potency and insight in knowing that older generations went through a lot of the same issues as we do.

In November we are planning a concert at Klub Primi, one of the few venues in Copenhagen that is actively thinking about gender balance. It will be quite a big event where we will showcase different styles and expressions in music, but also stimulate transgenerational meetings through creative actions. We have a couple of older, more experienced, composers and then some really young composers who only just began their careers, so I thought that it could be a unique opportunity for them to get to know and present each other's music, besides having the possibility of developing artistic collaborations among themselves.

**AJ: How does your network contribute a more diverse contemporary music scene?**

**ML:** When we organise events and share our practices and thoughts, we are both becoming stronger as artists, but we also promote new ways of thinking and doing that institutions might struggle with. Perhaps working with diversity is not always their priority, whereas for us it is really vital. Because we genuinely care about these issues. We come up with events that create momentum for artist-audience encounters which are not immediately available for institutions without a great deal of effort. In that sense, we are simultaneously empowering people that could identify themselves with us, and, hopefully, inspiring organisations to do things a bit differently.

**AJ:** In Sweden, there is a policy on gender equality in music directed at state-funded organisations. Is there something similar in Denmark?

**ML:** No, I do not know what is wrong with Denmark... *(laughter)*... I think it this Freudian thing, some kind of inferiority complex. It is a small country and people in power positions keep repeating 'there is no racism, there is no sexism.' They use the same rhetoric in established media channels, which I see when I follow the debates on racism and the situation with foreigners, which is extremely sad. The other day, I read a text by the Danish-American scholar Elisabeth Löwe Hunter, who researches racism in Denmark and Europe, and she explained this mechanism very well. Societies try desperately to hold to the debris of the status-quo through a kind of negation, which is basically repeating that a structural problem does not exist or that it is a non-issue. Similar tactics are applied when it comes to the gender imbalance. The Danish Composers' Society has collected statistics and made leaflets, mainly for general information, which clearly show that there are only very few token women composers presented in the orchestras' repertoire, but still there is no proper directions from the authorities. People are aware to a certain extent, but there are no active politics that could actually move things.

26 February 2020 / Marcela Lucatelli posted:



As many of you know, I have been a student of the post-graduation composition programme at The Royal Danish Academy of Music. During the whole year before my graduation in november, I worked on a piece for the Danish National Symphony Orchestra for the PULSAR project, a biannual opportunity for young composers from the masters and post-graduate degree at the conservatory to have short works played by the orchestra as a school assignment. The reason I'm writing this is that yesterday morning the orchestra chief Kim Bohr called my supervisor Niels Rosing-Schow and decided to cancel my piece from the program without any previous warning or feasible explanation. I called him, and I understood after a long talk that the real motivation behind this decision is that the musicians seem to have emotionally panicked in front of the possibility of being too musically exposed to some of my aesthetic values: vulnerability, humanity, and fragility. It seems too much to understand for them that I compose for the imperfect. Apparently a simple email I wrote about this theme to the string players in order to further explain the piece got forwarded within the institution and was received with insurgency, I was told.

The piece's musical material is absolutely executable - this is a common point of agreement among the conductor Jessica Cottis, my fellow colleagues and my supervisors. I have delivered the score in december and since then been available for dialog and eventual adjustments. Nevertheless, I didn't hear from them until a couple of days ago (including a very violent, disrespectful reaction from a percussionist, who demanded me to rearrange the percussion parts twice in order to play it - which I naturally did), despite diverse, long-term trials from my side. Apart from this single person, I was also contacted by the concert violinist, and we briefly solved together the few issues that the string section had. She sounded positive and everything seemed to be functioning and spinning forward. A couple of hours later, I got the cancelation call. Later I find out that my name had actually been erased from all digital media with no explanation even before I got the call. When I talked to conservatory and professional colleagues about this issue I'm told that the DRSO is known for having difficulties in working with female composition students, including absurd stories from former PULSAR festivals. Talking broader with people, it seems not to only be an issue with female composers (hence the usual absence of them in danish orchestral programmes) and composition students that would not immediately fit to their idea of obedience and the "how things should be", but also an overall attitude to new music in general. Most of the more established male composers won't possibly talk openly about this, since Denmark is a small country and actually doesn't have an orchestra with a focus on modern music. So in case they don't come to terms with

the DRSO and want their orchestra music to be played to a broader audience, they are literally fucked. So yes, the bomb has exploded on me. And I have nothing to lose, no commission, no fixed position in a danish institution, so here I am. Even with all the spread talk about the apparent reluctance from the orchestra to embrace new music, never in the history of this deal (I have to call it a deal, because the non-dialogical premises constantly imposed by the orchestra make it impossible to call it an educational collaboration) between the orchestra and the conservatory have they just simply denied to play a piece. In my case, it seems like they were so outraged by the idea and principles behind the piece since that would include thoroughly composed "bad playing" that they didn't even decide to give it a chance to be rehearsed - what Jessica found deeply disturbing, and me too. There was no concrete problem pointed out, and no effort at all in order to find fellow solutions. Yesterday there has been alleged a general issue regarding the "readability" of the score material by the orchestra chief, but unfortunately nothing else. Those who have seen the score know that I did a huge effort in order to make my aesthetics to meet the orchestra skills also in the clearest, highest notational level, and that's exactly aligned with what the artistic quality of the piece delivers. In addition, I have had the extremely severe guidance of Morten Olsen during the whole process, a person that is constantly dealing professionally with DRSO and other orchestras, in order to make sure that the material would fit their standards. Any issue whatsoever could have been covered during these last three months where they had access to the score (this is a school project, let's not forget that there is even more social responsibility involved). Paraphrasing the words of Jessica Cottis to me: "What kind of technical problem that isn't clearly communicated couldn't be solved in a composer's night shift? Or even during a week?". This is a question DRSO will never be able to answer. Now the atmosphere around the concert is getting really bad due to this arbitrary decision, and that's of course terrible for everyone involved. Cancellations occur, yes, but for reasonable reasons. Unfortunately a "We'll play it another time" in these conditions can't silence what this situation is really about. There are many issues here that have to be openly discussed and improved here so the whole orchestra structure in Denmark can fully exercise themselves as public service, and as a professional in this country, it's also my responsibility to bring them forward.

The real "technical performing problems, that couldn't be solved before the rehearsal start", which seem to scare them so much, can't actually ever be solved. Because those are mainly the principles on which I compose my music, and exactly what makes it socially relevant for the times we are living in.

399 reactions / 132 comments / 93 shares

**AJ: Do you have any personal examples of this?**

**ML:** Yes, I was involved in a scandal earlier this year when the Danish National Orchestra refused to perform a piece of mine. In March, the Danish National Orchestra was supposed to perform my music at the PULSAR project, a biannual opportunity for young composers at the conservatory to have short works played by the orchestra. A few days before the rehearsals, the orchestral chief called my supervisor and informed him that they had decided to cancel my piece. I did not receive any real explanation. The only actual argument they could come up with was that the score was unreadable. Obviously, this was up for a good deal of argumentation in social and mainstream media, since the score was public. I delivered the score three months before the planned concert and a professional supervisor had gone through it in order to avoid something like this happening. This incident made me realise how large-scale institutional music politics in Denmark works. There is a strong culture of silencing, in order to foment the illusion of a flawless institution and, why not to say, a national image. The conservatory is under the orchestra in this kind of political game, so their hands were tied. Some might say that this is normal orchestral behaviour, but it is also a truly political event. I am one of the few female Brazilian composers based in Europe and the meeting between different cultures and aesthetic ideals could potentially have become something really beautiful if they were even barely aware of its decolonial value.

**AJ: What are the biggest challenges that your network is facing?**

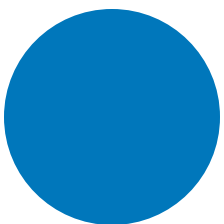
**ML:** I would say that just breaking the silence is a big enough challenge at the moment. There is a really long history of female silencing, not only in music, and we need to practice standing up for each other and being vocal about injustices. Recently, there has been a lot of political activity in the US and in the UK, with people making official statements and standing

together. These kinds of actions are a good start. Even though you cannot see an immediate result, it makes a difference. It is definitely better than staying quiet.

**AJ: What should the contemporary music scene do in order to gain more relevance in the rest of society?**

**ML:** For sure this current focus on new groups will lead to innovations, also in music. The core of renewal is people who have previously been oppressed or marginalised speaking up. It is about giving space to these groups and individuals, but also taking notice of all the things in-between and how all this potentially could generate new ways of presenting music. I do not mean falling into the commodified trap of always fomenting diversity through easy-listening music, but also looking beyond the ready-mades for the processes, undefined placings, aesthetics in-between. Contemporary music is a field where hidden or unspoken sounds can unfold and processes can be allowed to develop themselves in a way that is existentially relevant to audiences. Art is a place where you can engage with meaning or challenges in a non-binary or multi-layered way, which I think is an important part of life.

I believe younger composers in Denmark are mostly too busy with the challenges of their individual careers to engage more in collective movements. Capitalism has transformed music into the art of solitary individuality.



# ANNA XAMBÓ (WoNoMute)

interviewed by Anna Jakobsson

## BIO

---

**Anna Xambó** is co-founder of Women Nordic Music Technology (WoNoMute). Since January 2020, Xambó holds a position as senior lecturer in music and audio technology at De Montfort University in Leicester.

## networks

**Anna Jakobsson:** Approximately how many people are part of the network?

**Anna Xambó:** About 250 people.

**AJ:** Who can become a member?

**AX:** There are different levels of membership: members of the core organisation based at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology and University of Oslo and members of the WoNoMute network on different social media (Twitter, Facebook, Mastodon, mailing lists). The previously mentioned number is an estimate summing all the members from the different groups.

**AJ:** How was your network founded and what were the events or structural challenges that led to its foundation?

**AX:** I co-founded Women Nordic Music Technology (WoNoMute) in August 2018 when I was appointed associate professor in music technology at NTNU. I brought my special interest in improving the representation of women in music technology, and my past experience with both a leading role in the organisation Women in Music Tech (2016-2017, Georgia Tech) and as the author of the paper “Who Are the Women Authors in NIME? -Improving Gender Balance in NIME Research.”<sup>1</sup> WoNoMute emerged as a collaboration between NTNU and the UiO in the context of the new masters program Music Communication and Technology (MCT), also a collaboration between the two universities. The organisation is based on a core organisation based at NTNU and UiO, with the crucial help from WoNoMute members and advisors. Thanks to the

---

1. Anna Xambó, “Who Are the Women Authors in NIME? -Improving Gender Balance in NIME Research,” in *Proceedings of the New Interfaces for Musical Expression Conference* (Virginia: Virginia Tech Blacksburg, June 2018), 174-177. [https://www.nime.org/proceedings/2018/nime2018\\_paper0037.pdf](https://www.nime.org/proceedings/2018/nime2018_paper0037.pdf).

generous financial support of both NTNU and UiO during the first year we have been able to organise continuous online/presential seminars, interviews, workshops and video tutorials.

**AJ:** How would you describe the organisational structure of your network? How do you communicate?

**AX:** Just to clarify, this reply reflects how we operated during my time as a chair of the organisation from its inception in August 2018 until my departure to a new academic role at De Montfort University in January 2020. During the first year, the core members of the organisation were meeting regularly to catch up about the different organisation’s activities and divide the work. These meetings were also useful to bring new ideas, share experiences and discuss practicalities. Communication was via Zoom meetings and email. Beyond these meetings, we also had our internal meetings related to the NTNU activities and UiO had their internal meetings related to the UiO activities. For example, the Oslo node, which is led by Alexander Refsum Jensenius, is organising local workshops, which are led by the master students Mari Lesteberg and Ane Bjerkan. We would like to see WoNoMute as a horizontal network organisation, so new nodes can emerge and anyone from the organisation can propose and lead an activity as long as it aligns with the WoNoMute’s charter and vision.

**AJ:** What is the goal of your network? How do you work to reach that goal?

**AX:** The WoNoMute organisation aims to promote and connect the work of women in music tech at local, national and international levels. This goal is reached by organising activities that connect the local, national and international community.

The WoNoMute organisation aims to promote and connect the work of women in music tech at local, national and international levels.

**AJ:** Describe the most meaningful experience you have had working with your network.

**AX:** Organising the first edition of the seminar series and related interviews with expert women in music technology has been a key activity in the organisation that would not have been possible without the help and collaboration of the MCT master students, teachers, administrative roles from both NTNU and UiO, advisors, and both co-located and online audience from all around the world. The seminar series have been essential in helping to build a WoNoMute community and raise awareness at local, national and international levels. With these activities, first and foremost we hope that it can impact positively the guest speakers' careers because we promote and give visibility to their work. At the same time, although it is difficult to measure, organising these events might also impact positively the careers of the members of the organisation because our work has a world-wide visibility. Karolina Jawad, co-chair of the organisation and master student of the MCT programme, has taken the lead with the interviews, which were inspired by our interview experience at Women in Music Tech

at Georgia Tech. As a follow-up of the WoNoMute interviews, we co-wrote the paper "How to Talk of Music Technology: An Interview Analysis Study of Live Interfaces for Music Performance among Expert Women."<sup>2</sup> This research has informed Karolina's master thesis entitled "Gatekeepers by Design? Gender HCI for Audio and Music Hardware" (NTNU, UiO), which has been submitted and will be published later this year. This is a nice example of how our organisation activities can positively impact our own research and practice towards change.

**AJ:** What are the biggest challenges that your network is facing? How do you work with these challenges?

**AX:** A big challenge is obtaining funding beyond the university's support. One of the main objectives that the NTNU node had from the very beginning was to create valuable content during the first year so that it could become a sustainable organisation moving forward. This has not been achieved yet. Another challenge is the existing mobility in academia, which in turn affects the mobility of the organisation members. I personally think that rotating roles should be seen as beneficial so that new approaches and perspectives are welcome. However, we are still facing the main issue of lack of women in all the academic positions in the ladder, and therefore we might encounter a lack of mentoring and role models in the organisation, which I think is crucial for a healthy, well-distributed and well-represented organisation of these characteristics.

**AJ:** What do you your members need the most?

**AX:** This is not an easy answer, as we have several levels of membership as mentioned earlier, which

---

2. Karolina Jawad and Anna Xambó, "How to Talk of Music Technology: An Interview Analysis Study of Live Interfaces for Music Performance among Expert Women," in *Proceedings of the International Conference on Live Interfaces (ICLI 2020)* (Trondheim: NTNU, 2020), 41-47.



We are still facing the main issue of lack of women in all the academic positions in the ladder, and therefore we might encounter a lack of mentoring and role models in the organisation, which I think is crucial for a healthy, well-distributed and well-represented organisation of these characteristics.



points to different needs. I guess that a network should be supportive, at a general level, in terms of offering a safe space where the network members can exchange their thoughts, ideas and projects. Then, the nodes' mission should satisfy more closely the needs of the local members by hosting relevant activities. The workshops, for example, are useful to expose what is music technology to younger generations who then can decide whether it is an interesting topic to follow-up or not. The seminars, on the other hand, are useful to create a sense of community and share the work of incredible women, which might foster future collaborations.

**AJ: What should the contemporary music scene do in order to gain more relevance in the rest of society?**

**AX:** WoNoMute does not engage with contemporary musicians only but, from the experience of leading two organisations, WoNoMute and Women in Music Tech, I would suggest that generating conversations at a local, national and international level and offering these conversations as open free content is essential so that the impact is beyond the group. Also, interdisciplinary collaborations between different types of organisations and people can be a positive way of discovering different ontologies and epistemologies.

**AJ: What projects are you working on at the moment?**

**AX:** Due to personal reasons, I started a new academic position in January 2020 as a senior lecturer in music and audio technology at De Montfort University. My duties include teaching, research and practice. I am the PI of the project "MIRLCAuto: A Virtual Agent for Music Information Retrieval in Live Coding", which has been awarded an EPSRC HDI Network Plus Grant -within the Art, Music and Culture theme, and which is very exciting! There is little time for other activities, but I am currently the WiNIME officer of the NIME conference, with the main goal of promoting and connecting the work of women in the NIME community.



Interdisciplinary  
collaborations between  
different types of  
organisations and  
people can be a positive  
way of discovering  
different ontologies and  
epistemologies.



# SIRI HAUGAN HOLDEN (BALANSEKUNST)

interviewed by **Vanessa Massera**

## BIO

---

**Siri Haugan Holden** is a political scientist and managing director at Balansekunst, an association working to promote equality and diversity in the arts. Holden has previously worked with international cooperation, human rights and environmental protection.

## networks

**Vanessa Massera:** On your website you say that you specifically challenge structural inequalities, stereotypes and prejudice. Do you see resistance to this?

**Siri Haugan Holden:** With regards to resistance, I would have to say that there is a lot of good will and a lot of great words in the Norwegian art scene but there are two main arguments of resistance. The first one is the old one of 'diversity as opposed to quality,' as if they cannot coexist. The other one is about how art needs to be free and that any regulation or attempt to make it more inclusive will in fact make the art somehow lesser because it will not be as free as it should be. I am guessing those are also well-known arguments for you.

I would say those are the most common points of resistance. We all agree that diversity is important but when it comes to actually doing something these are the arguments that come up.

**VM:** Are there examples of initiatives that you took where your presence made a significant difference?

**SHH:** I hesitate to point to something as a solo Balansekunst victory because we are so many working in the same direction and I do not want to take anyone else's light. But I have absolutely no doubt that Balansekunst's voice now holds some weight, seeing as we are almost ninety organizations. If I were to pick one example it would be our work with combatting sexual harassment in the arts, due to the sector being so vulnerable because of all the temporality; everything that makes artists specifically vulnerable to harassment.

Balansekunst was able to quickly gather powerful institutions to address this kind of harassment, which we were able to do pretty quickly because we already had our platform. Whereas harassment has been addressed through several initiatives and

the #MeToo chronicles in the paper, our platform allowed us to combine the efforts of many institutions. We were able to quickly gather so many interesting institutions to create a common front, so I would say that that is a good example of how we can mobilize quickly when there are many of us.

I would also say that grouping together so many institutions, we have a huge advantage in that our members talk about Balansekunst. They discuss our strategies and goals in their meetings with politicians, so the work is not only done at the office and by our board who are really present and involved. It is also so many of our members who really do their fair share of the work.

**VM:** This makes me think of the Canadian League of Composers, where they came up with the Canadian Pledge to have 50% representation male/female, but Balansekunst seems to be an even better example because there are a lot of people involved and it is more than a pledge, it is a lot of people working towards the same goal. It is really inspiring.

**SHH:** I must say that when we meet the government, I find it really helpful that this is an initiative that comes from within the sector itself. It is not an agenda that has been pushed down from the state level. It is actually something that the institutions and organizations themselves want to do something about. That gives us a lot of legitimacy in our meetings and conversations with politicians.

**VM:** That makes a lot of sense. When you are met with the argument that the arts should not be regulated too much, what is your comeback for that?

**SHH:** Our way of communicating is oriented towards dialogue and cooperation rather than conflict or shaming, so we really want to sit down with people

I have absolutely no doubt that Balansekunst's voice now holds some weight, seeing as we are almost ninety organizations.

and argue our case and try to convince them to join us. What we try to do is to make this division that it should be possible to talk about creating safe spaces without making it impossible to make art that can push boundaries. In my view it is a very clean line. I am a political scientist. To me safe is a very nice and beautiful word but in our work with combatting sexual harassment, we quickly realized that it is not a word that everyone in the art field wants to associate with their work because it feels like it does not have teeth, it is not dangerous.

I would say 'safe' is a word that we have not had to go back on but rather rephrase because we strongly believe in advocating for institutions to take responsibility and to reflect the diversity of the society they exist within. Even though we have this dialogue-oriented approach, we do not want to take 'The art should be free' as a final answer. We will still be there and continue to be annoying. I mean especially if you have grants from the state, you definitely have to realize that the art you do now is not free when people do not have access. The freedom you want is keeping someone else out so it cannot really be said to be free.

**VM:** You mentioned that the cultural world affects society in general. Do you see examples where initiatives in arts and culture affect society in general?

**SHH:** This is a good question and I am always sorry to say that we do not have as much data as we would wish. There are so many initiatives for young female-identifying technicians in the industry to be employed in light and sound but we do not really have the numbers. We know that a lot of people participate in these mentorship programs but we do not know how many of them stay. We do not have the numbers to be able to be clear on how things have changed, which is sad and we are definitely working to change that. In Norway, we are really good at counting the gender balance but when it comes to other kinds of identities or certain aspects that fall under the big umbrella of diversity, we are not as good. We are trying not only to start this conversation but to see some actual action so that we will be able to pinpoint the changes. I have been working in Balansekunst for four years and I know that people that have been in the industry for so much longer than me are saying that they are having the same fights that they had ten or fifteen years ago. So, there is definitely movement I would say, especially when it comes to gender balance. There is no doubt about that but when it comes to the broader term of 'diversity' we are far from where we want to be unfortunately.

**VM:** Do you see your definition of diversity as different from that of other groups?

**SHH:** We use a broad understanding of diversity which includes ability, sexual orientation, ethnicity and so on. Especially in Norwegian debates, diversity is often only used to pinpoint ethnic background. I would say our definition diverts from that single understanding.

I read this interesting comparison that looked at how the term has been interpreted and developed

differently in the Scandinavian countries. Sweden has had this broader understanding for a long time and Norway has been slowly following behind them, but I do think that more and more people here think about more aspects than just ethnicity now compared to when they heard the term diversity for the first time.

**VM:** Do you have a Norwegian equivalent for the Swedish expression 'tolkningsföreträdere' [ed: interpretative prerogative]?

**SHH:** Actually no, we use the Swedish word when we talk about it in Norway. We do not really have the same but it is such a good word and it can make people understand things very clearly with just one word, so I really enjoy that. I have to admit we borrow a lot from Sweden. A lot of good thoughts and initiatives have been born out of our inspiration from Sweden.

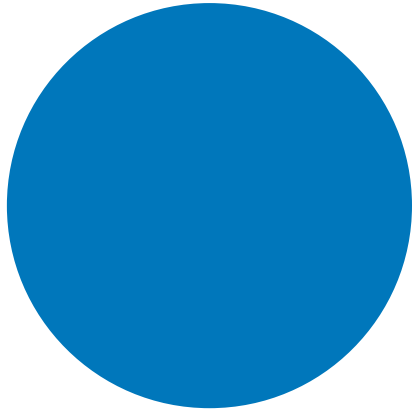
**VM:** Speaking of terms, have you seen media in Norway follow your advice on how to discuss music and make a difference?

**SHH:** We have a national newspaper database called Retriever and one of the things Balansekunst has been really vocal about is not using the term 'girl band' when it is not needed. The database shows that the use of this term really dropped in the 2010s. In recent years it is hardly been used at all by most nationwide papers which I find really uplifting, except in contexts where the term has been really problematized. So I found some numbers. Purely descriptive terms about girl bands occurred more frequently in local and regional newspapers. They are not as present in the national ones and in 2010 'girl band' had 162 hits in Retriever but last year it was only 33. That is not to give a clean bill of health to Norwegian music journalism because there is a lot of sexist language still going on, especially when it comes to Eurovision-type events but there is definitely an awareness that these things have consequences and that is really great to see.

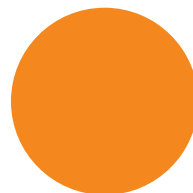
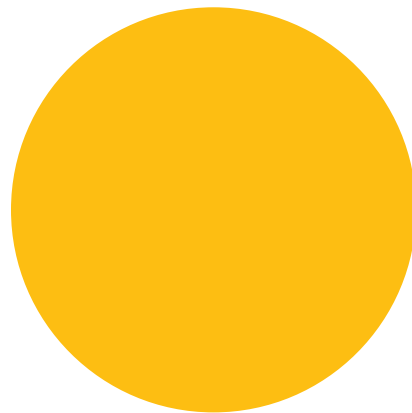
**VM:** Talking about statistics, in my experience it is kind of sobering when you see that we still have these types of numbers in 2020. How do you approach organizers who are convinced that they are accurately representing women when they say 20% women is acceptable because 20% of all composers represented by the local composer's association are women and things like that?

**SHH:** Well of course we say 'Good on you. We're happy that you've reached this goal' but we then try to appeal to the basic artistic or human instinct to be part of creating something new, to move further on, that you should not be happy with stagnating by saying that this is enough because this is the pool we have. One of my personal favorite fights I guess is to try and hold institutions accountable on all levels. It happens so often that you push the responsibility down the ladder. In Norway we call it 'Kulturskolen' where kids go to learn music instruments. In the end everyone just points at 'Kulturskolen' and says these guys are the ones to blame. The opera is criticised for not having enough female conductors and then they point to the music academy and then the academy says they do not get enough applicants. It is like this never-ending blame game. For a sector that considers

When we meet the government, I find it really helpful that this is an initiative that comes from within the sector itself.



For a sector that considers itself creative and proactive it is embarrassing that people should not want to be part of creating even more amazing lineups and using the talent that is obviously there.



itself creative and proactive it is embarrassing that people should not want to be part of creating even more amazing lineups and using the talent that is obviously there. We try to make visible how the responsibility for progress is there even though we have reached the 20 percent mark.

And if I were to add one more thing, I would also say that we have talked quite a bit about role models and the importance of seeing other people you can identify yourself with in positions you might be interested in. I would argue that if you put a lot of people from an underrepresented group on stage, I guess the percentage of female members in the composers' society would probably exceed 20%.

**VM:** You probably have some of the same problems as well. With gender balance people do not want quotas because either some people feel tokenized or the organizers can feel like they are diluting the quality. It is almost like saying art should be free, but in this case it is more like 'Well, clearly men are better' because there are more men. How do you feel about quotas in general?

**SHH:** It is not a goal, it is not good in itself but a very handy shortcut. I would definitely say I am positive towards quotas. I think at some point the debate went off-track and in Norway at least, radical affirmative action is not legal. We had this judgment in the EU which said that radical affirmative action, where you choose someone that is less qualified than the other candidate, is not legal.

What frustrates me so much is that when we talk about quotas and affirmative action, it is not about choosing someone who is not worthy or not good enough. I really wish that we could just end that confusion once and for all. It is just a broadening of what kind of person gets to express themselves on stage, not putting super amateurs on stage. It is annoying that we always have to come back to this irrelevant discussion.

**VM:** You can always make the comparison with radio quotas. There is always a language quota 'Do not put more than this percentage of English songs.' English music is not offensive for Norwegian singers, it is just so there is a space for them. Same here: people never question if there is more room for French people singing songs. Of course! It is just so it is not all in English, because there is more representation in English.

**With accessibility being a major focus for Balansekunst, how do you reconcile artists and audiences? For example, for artists in Norway who live far from the capital, it is more expensive for them to get there. I have some friends in Norway who say that their trips will sometimes get cancelled because they cannot get the grant because it is so much more expensive. Have you thought about this?**

**SHH:** Most of our work involves going to institutions, so we do not as often host things that require people to travel. We are definitely aware that we need a presence throughout the whole country. We are a nation-wide organization so we have members all over the country and when we do local events we try to do it with the cooperation of our local members so that it has some local grounding and still feels like a local initiative. But I must say that in the last couple of months we have been getting pushed to become more digitally fluent. We are starting to realize how much can be done online through digital channels, but I realize that might not be a very good answer for the proper concert hosting or event organizing you are talking about.

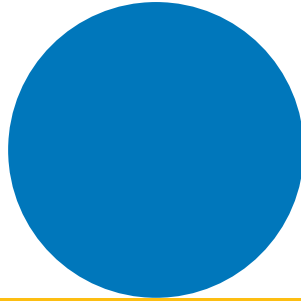
**VM:** This is an ongoing problem that I see. Of course it is not just the responsibility of Balansekunst or an organization like it but I am thinking about it more and more because not only capitals should enjoy

**cultural representation. I was part of UNM last year and we organized a festival in Piteå in Sweden. It was cool being way up in the North and having a very different experience than always being in Stockholm. There is also lots of activity in the local scene in the North, you just do not hear about it much when you are not there.**

**SHH:** Yeah, it really is important not to forget it. It is such an important part of our country.

**VM:** Last year I had a residency in Vesterålen and it was amazing, it was one of my best experiences, being in the North. The community is very involved, they are very interested. There is such space for culture and I wonder why we do not hear about it more.

**SHH:** I think that in some municipalities there are certain grants that are for diversity and culture work. It is very important that it is not just one single person's initiatives and beliefs that makes a municipality or a town do this kind of work and that resources are allocated properly so it can become a stable offering to the local community. Because often someone is really excited about a certain thing, they come in with a lot of energy but then they might disappear and I really believe in not just relying on one person doing everything for their local organizer. You have to have it in your guidelines and in how you look at applications.



Affirmative action is  
just a broadening of  
what kind of person  
gets to express  
themselves on stage,  
not putting super  
amateurs on stage.

# TERRI HRON (CANADIAN NEW MUSIC NETWORK)

interviewed by Anna Jakobsson

## BIO

---

**Terri Hron** is a musician, a performer and a multimedia artist. Her work explores historical instrumental performance practice and repertoire, field recording, ceramics, movement and video. She often works in close collaboration with others. Besides composing and performing works for and with others, she produces performances, gatherings and events.

Terri studied musicology and art history at the University of Alberta, historical and contemporary performance at the Conservatorium van Amsterdam and electroacoustic composition at the Université de Montréal. Her research focuses on collaborative practice and scoring in multimedia performance art. She was a Visiting Scholar at Wesleyan University before taking her current position as Executive Director of the Canadian New Music Network, where she has developed programs focusing on equity and access.

## networks

**Anna Jakobsson:** You have been the executive director for the Canadian New Music Network since 2017. What is the background of your organisation and what is your goal?

**Terri Hron:** The Canadian New Music Network was founded in 2005 by a group of people across the country led by Montreal-based composer and performer Tim Brady, and has a broad mandate which is focused on community building and networking. The network represents anyone who is practicing or supporting art music and sound art in Canada. Regional representation and more recently also questions of equity, diversity and inclusion are also very important to us. Diversity is always a kind of problematic term but for us it has several forms, including not only race, culture and gender identity but also language and physical ability, age and aesthetics.

**AJ: How are you engaging with these matters?**

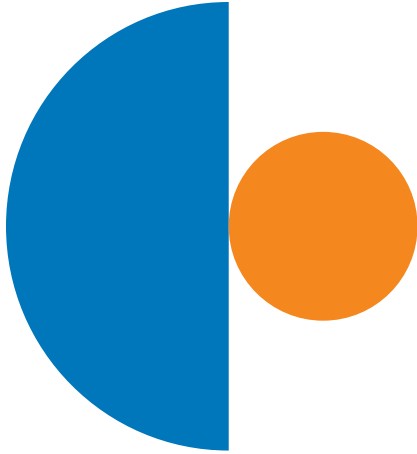
**TH:** We identified four goals for our organization. The first is, as you can imagine from our name, networking and communication, and working to encourage and facilitate collaborations. The second is to advocate that new music practitioners and supporters across the country be heard and to increase awareness of new music activities. Third is the celebration of our achievements and the many initiatives that are happening across the country. Last, and on a more practical level, we collect resources from various organizations that could be of use to people working in new music. We also produce resources ourselves, which are strongly influenced by our focus on diversity, equality, equity, justice and fairness. Until the pandemic, our main activity was the biannual forum, which used to be something between a showcase and a conference. In recent years, it has shifted towards more of a knowledge sharing and professional development activity.

**AJ: What projects are the Canadian New Music Network working on at the moment?**

**TH:** Most recently we have launched an online platform for sharing participatory music projects. These are often happening in non-artistic environments like healthcare, community centres, social services and correctional facilities, so the platform becomes a place where they can be shared. We have also hosted a series of conversations on issues facing us in the new music community. They started as in person conversations but have now moved online and are recorded for people to view later. At the beginning of the pandemic the conversations were responding to the huge changes and the grief that was felt in the community. Currently we are in the middle of our decolonization series curated by racialized and Indigenous voices. Last week we hosted an event curated by the indigenous artist Olivia Shortt, who is based in Toronto. She invited people who are working in the arts, sharing ideas and best practices for indigenizing spaces and working with indigenous artists. I think a lot of us working in our field find the term “new music” very problematic and quite colonial. One of the things that I found difficult when I took my position in 2017 was the name of the organisation, Canadian New Music Network. Whereas when it was founded in 2005 most people thought it was a completely natural name, we are realizing now to what extent “new music” is actually quite exclusive and suffers from the same problems of colonialism as classical music, which comes from the same eurological tradition. In a country like Canada that is problematic.

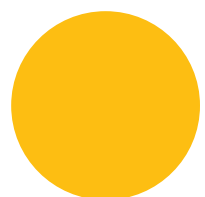
**AJ: Identifying what practices actually fit under the term new music is a complex question. Would you say that you have a broad spectrum of different musical practices within your network?**

**TH:** New music is a small community within the yet smaller community of classical music. Moving



Maybe this digital revolution is something that we cling to because it speaks to some of these core values that we have as artists and as people, all of these notions of the “biggest” and the “most”, the importance of reaching as many people as possible.

But is that really sustainable?



## networks

forward I think everybody realizes that there is no future in maintaining these narrow definitions of what we do, also because they are keeping us within cultural practices that are not necessarily something we chose consciously. I think that music education is in the beginning of a massive change. Until recently, most of what you could learn in music conservatories was eurological music. If we look at the reality of demographics in Canada, not to mention that we are in the traditional territories of Indigenous nations that have their own sound practices, supporting change is a more ethical way to use public resources. These things are still difficult to shift though, because most people in the industry have worked very hard to be where they are. Of course they love their work and it has great value, but it does not leave a lot of space for recognizing other traditions.

**AJ: The past year has seen a lot change regarding digital formats in the arts. What has been your experience of this?**

**TH:** When we first started to have conversations online, for example our series on decolonization that I mentioned earlier, it all felt a little bit awkward. Now I think that most people are in agreement that this is a really great format which allows information to be available much more widely. Perhaps we can use better recording and editing practices to make them easier for people to watch. Being involved in so many online activities is making everybody realize the new potential of this tool as a way to communicate ideas.

When it comes to presenting musical works in a digital format, I feel a loss like everyone else. I have also noticed that the technology gap has increased, as only some people have the experience and access to materials like computers, recording equipment and editing software that give them a definite advantage when it comes to creating new work for an online-only format. People living in big cities probably also have an advantage in being able to access performance venues to create performances for online streaming.

It is very different if you live in a big city where there are excellent facilities and presenters really thinking about this stuff very intensely or if you are in a remote community where you might not even have good internet. These kinds of inequities are being starkly underlined, which is something that I worry about.

Maybe this digital revolution is something that we cling to because it speaks to some of these core values that we have as artists and as people, all of these notions of the “biggest” and the “most”, the importance of reaching as many people as possible. But is that really sustainable? Of course there are people who very much thrive being online but I do not think they are in the majority. Maybe we as artists need to create things that are really small scale in our neighbourhoods, in our back alleys, and to start to value the betterment of every square inch of our world rather than striving to have as many followers as possible. How can we sustain our local community and each other on a one-to-one basis? How does something gain value even if it is just meaningful for my neighbours? This is very hard to implement on a massive scale because capitalism and colonialism have been at work for so many generations and are so institutionalized. To shift this would be a real revolution, I think.

**AJ: What resources does your organization have to support remote musical communities?**

**TH:** Before the pandemic started we had just put in place a new strategy to offer financial support for people to come to our events from wherever they were. This is not working now for obvious reasons, so we definitely need to invest more thought into this area. Figuring out what strategies could actually help people is really complicated issue since a lot of the tools that are required are beyond the means of our organization. We are small and do not have the money to support the necessary infrastructure, to set up better internet for somebody for example, or to get them access to a studio they could use for

broadcasting. In order to solve the problem, I think it is going to take more money from the government specifically in this area. It is an expensive reality to give people access.

**AJ: What are your thoughts on making the arts more sustainable after the pandemic?**

**TH:** Everybody has stopped travelling due to the pandemic, which in Canada is very tangible because we are an enormous country. Going from Vancouver to Toronto is like going from Madrid to Moscow. Wanting to tour nationally is natural but in a country of our size maybe we need to rethink how this is done. There is an environmental reality which I personally think that people have been neglecting before the crisis. Although everybody seems relieved that a vaccine is coming, we are also realizing that this is just the first of a series of events that will influence the climate as a whole and that it is going to become more important to support people without necessarily moving bodies.

**AJ: All of these new conditions and circumstances can of course also be very mentally restraining. With that in mind, what has this recent year been like for you?**

**TH:** There is the grief of having to give up what was a very satisfying and exciting way of life. I have been at home since the beginning of the pandemic. It has been 15 years since I have been in one place for so long. My friendships and collaborative creations are all scattered. It is very hard to suddenly shift a career or a strategy that all of our teaching institutions have prepared us for and that we have spent years building. I lost projects that I had been working on for years, as well as other shows that I had just produced. It is like you give birth to this thing and it cannot live. I wonder if this show will even be meaningful; will people want to see it when all of this is over? Letting go of all that was rough and then also to feel how that is happening for everyone was really

intense. It is this sort of feeling that you have been working your whole life to be ready to perform and create something but then you cannot do it. It is really hard to retain a feeling of self-worth.

**AJ: In this time of instability, how can we increase our sense of community in the contemporary music scene on both local and international scale?**

**TH:** I feel very confused about it. Twenty-five years ago, when I had just started my studies, there was still this idea that going away to Europe was the thing to do to really become a musician. I have seen the transition towards that not being the case anymore, as there were certain places in Canada that became "good enough". When I came to Quebec after a decade in Europe, I came to know this very particular ecosystem that has developed around Francophone culture. As an outsider, I have sometimes found it fairly insular and showing a certain regionalism. When I was thinking from the perspective I had before that foreign things must be better, I was more bothered by these tendencies of decentralisation. Now I realize that it is probably an efficient way to create a self-sustaining system that has its own flavors and its own ways of being. Of course it is also about politics (that is always the case) but in many ways it is more sustainable.

Moving forward, in my opinion, there definitely has to be more celebration of regional cultures and less conformity to a global set of values. Until the industrial revolution every place developed local culture and all of those cultures are quite incredible. What happened over the last 200 years that imposed these values and these common ideals on the whole world? I think that thing is pretty much colonialism. In order to change this, we have to start inside ourselves and with all of these values that we hold dear, which makes it very confrontational. Since I have been actively thinking about these things it has been really rough sometimes. I realize how much of my self-worth

and how much of what guides me, in my intuition and in my practice, comes from these colonial notions. When I think about what it would mean shift this on a massive scale, having many people, institutions and countries doing this simultaneously, I do not even know what would come out of that. But I know that it is most likely something that would be more sustainable on a local level.

Moving forward, in my opinion, there definitely has to be more celebration of regional cultures and less conformity to a global set of values. Until the industrial revolution every place developed local culture and all of those cultures are quite incredible.

INSTITUTIONS

INSTITUTIONS

INSTITUTIONS

INSTITUTIONS

INSTITUTIONS

INSTITUTIONS

SNOW TUNES ON!

SNOW TUNES ON!

SNOW TUNES ON!

SNOW TUNES ON!

SNOW TUNES ON!

SNOW TUNES ON!

# DENA DAVIDA

interviewed by Brandon Farnsworth

## BIO

---

**Dena Davida** has practiced contemporary dance for 45 years as a performer, teacher, researcher and curator. A third generation American and a Californian who immigrated to Montréal in 1977, she participated in the “second generation” of contact improvisers, taught Nikolais dance technique and Laban-based creative movement for children (becoming a Certified Movement Analyst). She co-founded, directed and was curator for Montréal’s *Tangente* dance performance organization from 1980-2019. She was also co-founder of the *Festival international de nouvelle danse de Montréal*. She taught dance improvisation and composition, Laban Movement Analysis, dance aesthetics and anthropology as a *chargée de cours* at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQÀM) for over 25 years. Her essays and research articles have been published in numerous magazines and journals. In her twenties she completed a B.A. in theatre with a dance minor at the University of California at Riverside and Irvine, in her thirties an M.A. in Movement Studies from Wesleyan University. At age 57, she completed the doctoral *Programme d’études et pratiques des arts* at UQÀM with an ethnographic study of meaning in “contemporary dance events” (a case study and analysis of O Vertigo Danse’s *Luna* choreographic project). Her recent publications: a chapter on the founding Montréal university dance programmes in *Renegade Bodies: Canadian Dance in the 1970s*, the editor of two international anthologies *Fields in Motion: Ethnography in the worlds of dance* (2012) and *Curating Live Arts: Critical perspectives, essays and conversations in theory and practice* (2018). In 2014, she initiated a long-term project to develop the theory and practice of performing arts curation with a website, an international symposium, seminal master’s level seminar and soon, the publication of a biannual journal for the field, *Natya: The Journal for Live Arts Curation*.

**Brandon Farnsworth:** What were the key debates and outcomes during that early period of developing a multicultural approach to dance practice at Tangente?

**Dena Davida:** To begin my response I will take us back into the 1970s. The social mores of that period, in which I was raised—and which are now resurging powerfully—were pivotal to my world view. I was both a feminist and an anti-Vietnam War protester, I marched and fought for progressive causes. This ethos became ingrained in my future vision of curation. The way it gravitated into the practice curatorship for me—which I called ‘artistic direction’ at the time—was by way of the postmodern dance revolution of the 1960s in the United States which opened the question of ‘what is dance?’ to the world. That was the primary question of that first phase of a dance revolution, which ten years later morphed into ‘what does dance mean?’ That whole period consisted of unearthing this notion and opening the possibility that all movement can be seen as dance. Nothing could be a more fundamental revolutionary question for dance than ‘what is dance?’

When I arrived as an immigrant from the United States in Montréal, Canada in 1977, the debate had then only just begun in Québec about the creation of a fund for professional dance. The core question was: what and who should we be funding? The provincial funding bodies organized a conference, formed committees, etc. I researched the traces of that debate for a chapter in *Renegade Bodies: Canadian Dance in the 1970s*, which I co-wrote together with Catherine Lavoie-Marcus, and which was published by Dance Collection Danse. The debates centered on what professional dance is, creating a distinction between recreational/non-professional and professional dance, something which was an even more fundamental debate than what dance genres are on stages.

In the 1990s, the debate in the Canadian dance

milieu focused more on what was being called ‘folk dance,’ and about whether anything outside of the ballet, modern, or jazz dance forms and styles ought to be funded through professional dance funding. They used the term ‘folk dance.’ I used the word traditional, because it encompasses so many forms, including ballet. There was also, once again, debate around the word ‘professional’ when it came to First Nations dances, as they had to ask who decides what ‘professional’ means in that cultural context. (They later settled on the idea of inviting a recognized First Nations’ expert to evaluate each case.)

Initially, folk dance forms fell outside of the eligibility criteria for applying to the Canada Council of the Arts for grants, as ‘amateur’ and community dance. Professional folk dance companies then sprang up that started re-staging, choreographing and later experimenting as well with folk dance forms. I am thinking of *Shumka* in particular, the Ukrainian dance company that dance anthropologist Andriy Nahachewsky has written about and danced with, who later became the head of Ukrainian studies at the University of Calgary.

The Canada Council for the Arts finally decided their fund for artists would be open to folk dancers if their work might be considered ‘professional.’ This was in the 1990s, which was interesting in that at the same time, professional dance itself was only just coming into being in Québec, where only two companies were funded: *Les Grands Ballets Canadiens* and *Les Ballets Jazz*.

In regards to my curation of Tangente, my perspective became ingrained with the postmodern notion, under the influence of Judson Dance Theatre, that any expressive form of movement —any movement in fact—might and could be considered dance. In the first iteration of Tangente in 1981, we had a little loft performance space in which I invited any artists who were moving about expressively, including for instance, an early sound art group called Sonde,

four musicians who would take objects and move them about through space as they were producing sounds. It did not have to be something that called itself dance, so pretty much any performer who was moving about imaginatively might be programmed. At the time, there was very little 'dance' per se in Québec at the time, and I wanted something happening every week. So, in my view, everything was possible including strange performances that did not ultimately seem to function well or that were a bit shocking. I welcomed all of it, even including people from the ballet milieu. Everything was in my curatorial grab bag. For me, that has been the radical stance I have maintained throughout the years: that all forms, styles and genres of choreography were welcome in my programming. Over time, so much more dance has arisen in Montreal with so many more dancers seeking performance opportunities, that I have focused more and more on what looks like dancing to everybody and less on physical theater, performance, art action, sound art, etc. because the dance milieu has needed access to my theatre more and more and those performance forms on the fringes of dance have been less prominent. But all kinds of live performances that include bodies in motion have always remained welcome.


The initial series that presented a frame for dances from traditional forms outside of Euro-American contemporary dance was called *Ascendances*. The 'modernizing' of traditional forms was the thematic idea for the series, which brought to Tangente many kinds of dance that had not really been seen before on a professional stage in Montréal. The *Ascendances* series was the beginning of opening my programming to what I still call "traditional forms moving towards modernity." In that first series, there were short works by people like Zab Maboungou, along with Maria Castello and Roger Sinha. Those who presented themselves as an experimentalist in any of these traditional dance forms were included in this series. My programming also featured another related series called *Corps politique*, focused on political dance, for

which there were three editions. I then later focused on men creating dance, as the history of modern and postmodern dance was dominated by women and which, in its third and last iteration, became narrowed down to questions of male gender identity and homosexuality. All of these series were a matter of declaring publicly that dance could be socially and politically engaged, which was controversial at that time in Montreal. Later, I organized a series called *Nueva flamenca* and another featuring new African-identified dances called *Danses noires* (a title chosen by the choreographers themselves). At some point, I had to ask myself if I was creating a kind of ghettoization of forms. The solution was just to take them apart and to program these choreographers into my regular programming. This also happened with break dancers, the urban dancers who came to me interested in staging their work inside a theatre space. I created some focused performance evenings on that genre of dance. Urban dance-makers are part of every season now.

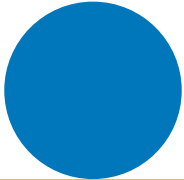
Another powerful influence on my curatorial outlook stems from the 1969 article by Joann Wheeler Keali'inohomoku, *An Anthropologist Looks at Ballet as a Form of Ethnic Dance*. In this iconic text she proposes that all dances are, in fact, ethnic forms which are shaped within a specific cultural context and historic era. One of my biggest challenges as a curator is when an artist from a dance form I do not know much about comes in and says their work is experimental and it does not look that way to me. I need to learn more about this dance form before I am able to judge it as innovative enough for Tangente.

**BF:** Looking back on those early debates in dance, is there anything you see in retrospect that ended up failing, or ended up not working? Moments of failure can sometimes be even more interesting than what works sometimes.

**DD:** The first time I presented *Ascendances* I found the



In regards to my curation of Tangente,  
my perspective became ingrained  
with the postmodern notion, under the  
influence of Judson Dance Theatre,  
that any expressive form of movement  
– any movement in fact – might and  
could be considered dance.



dance critics were not perceiving or understanding the innovative features of the choreography. They judged the dance as not contemporary enough for Tangente. Some of the audience, particularly the contemporary dancers, thought this too. Certain spectators were rather stand-offish and would critique the work during the post-show talks as much too traditional for their tastes. The audiences were mixed though, so that dancers from traditional dance communities were interspersed with the contemporary, new dance, postmodern dance audience. This mixing led to complex audience responses.

That also happened when I first programmed a duet conceived and danced by France Geoffroy (along with able-bodied dancer Kuldip-Singh), who is a paraplegic dancer in a wheelchair. The audience did not know how to react to this kind of dancing, thinking that they either had to admire her for the effort or perhaps even pity her. It was just so outside of what they had previously considered as professional dance. I came to understand that there will always be a struggle when something is new for an audience.

The other failure I already described, in my conversations with artists when trying to understand what modernity meant in their own context and to attempting to articulate that in programme notes. Whether their work suited our mandate, and how to figure that out, was one of my greatest challenges as a curator, even with my skills developed a dance anthropologist. As Keali'inohomoku once said in the classroom, 'We are all ethnocentric.'

It has been the same thing with urban dance. The first time a break dancer came to me and said they would like to dance in our theater space, my first question was, 'Why would you want to dance in my theater instead of on the street? What does that mean to you?' The first conversations were very awkward but I eventually did end up programming a company called Solid State with 13 B-girls. Some of them came from contemporary dance but others were strictly

from street dance. I was confident enough that they were pushing in a new direction to put them into an evening's program in which we created the ambiance of a club scene. In later years, I was called to task by urban dancers for my lack of knowledge during an audience talk and so decided that I was not always the best choice of facilitator for certain kinds of dance talks. These urban dancers also finally answered my initial question of 'why move from the street into a theatre,' maybe 20 years later. The answer was, 'I would like to see what I can do if I dance for more than just a few minutes and I had lighting and sound systems, a stage space, video projectors and all of this material at my disposal. If I did a longer piece that was maybe 20, 30, even 60 minutes long, what could I express that would be more than one little burst of energy on the street?'

**BF: I would like to talk now more about live arts curating, specifically understood as a practice of care, and one closely related to nurturing relationships. How do you navigate the importance of building relationships in this field with the desire to program artists from many different backgrounds and communities?**

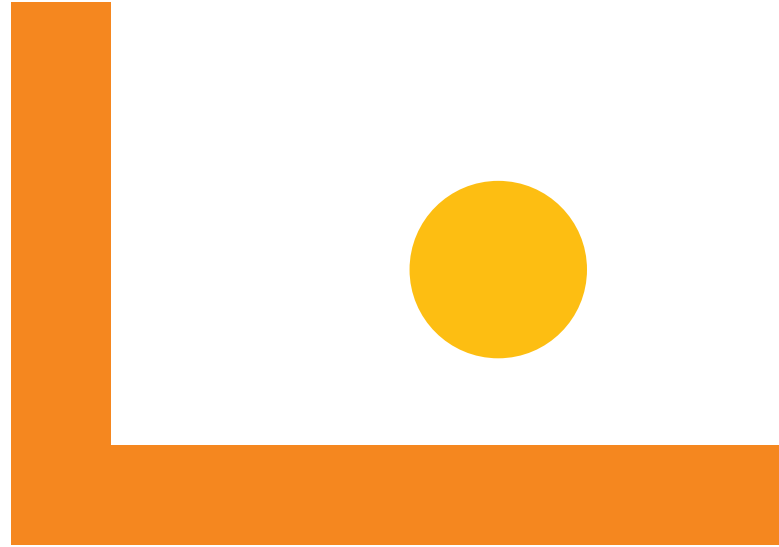
**DD:** I was brought up in Hollywood in a very capitalistic, fame-and-fortune cultural industry that all of my relatives participated in. I was rebellious, though I always wanted to be an artist. I was quite rebellious against that form of artmaking, that particular political and economic context, mainly because people around me seemed to be very unhappy: suicide, drugs, divorce; they did not seem to be bringing joy to themselves or to the world. Not that there aren't some wonderful artists among them, but I resolved to create more intimate, personal, humane contexts for making and presenting art. That rebelliousness formed my idea of Tangente as always small, intimate and caring.

I eventually started working with Stéphane Labbé,

who over time became the general director of the space, and so was able to concentrate on my role as curator. He moved us even more towards support and care for younger artists who were at the beginning of their career. That has been our exclusive focus for the last ten years, including mature dancers who would come forward with their first choreographic work at age 40 or 45. We developed a multitude of ways to support artists who are just beginning to experiment and are searching for their 'voices.' Mentorship became part of it. Our whole team at Tangente has taken a very pedagogical, supportive attitude towards helping them through the stages of production, coaching them about the possibilities of lighting and sound, what is involved in signing a contract, etc. Within our new permanent space at The Wilder - Espace danse, we were able to give them an extra week before their performance to begin to formulate the technical setup of their work. I initiated the Habitations weeks in which artists were given the theatre space freely, with no restrictions. These were all different forms of support for young artists that an older, main-stage artist does not need or ask for.

We have tried to take chances on an artist because of how they articulate their work and what I have observed in creative sessions in their studio. It is this whole conundrum of curating the unknown, the immaterial, the risky. We take that on, and failure does happen. That is part of Tangente and hopefully the audience understands that we all take a chance on the genesis of a new work together.

I am someone who is against wielding too much power. I try to remain sensitive to the power I have and to the impact that not programming someone has on their work and career. Over the years I have worked on getting better at how to initiate dialogue with an artist, especially for the first time, how to let them know that I see promise in their future and what that promise might be. I am learning how to explain why I think their work does not respond to my concept of contemporary, experimental, innovative



One of my biggest challenges as a curator is when an artist from a dance form I do not know much about comes in and says their work is experimental and it does not look that way to me.

I need to learn more about this dance form before I am able to judge it as innovative enough for Tangente.

and what that means. I prefer to think of myself as a gate-opener and not a gate-keeper.

It is a great discomfort for me to realize that I have held on to this contemporary, experimental, innovative mindset for so long but I remain interested in the art of our time, and things that really represent the world we live in today. I have also become very attached to individualized practices, artists who create a world that is not just a copy of someone else's technique, or ideas, or work that has a powerful personal vision. It is hard to let go of that ethos. I am aware of my power and feel discomfort with the fact that I am only one person who is making all these programming decisions despite listening to the suggestions of artistic advisory committees.

That is why when I left Tangente at the end of May 2020, I put into place a curatorial committee of five choreographers. It is no longer a single person with the power to say yes or no, rather there is a group in which each individual has equal power. I watched their first round of programming discussions and they don't always agree. That is probably a positive sign of their diversity of viewpoints. It is worth mentioning, in these turbulent social times, that none of them are white, heterosexual men. We have a First Nations and a black dancer, a choreographer originally from Colombia, an art history scholar of curation who really defends gender diversity, and a gay male activist. So what I did in leaving Tangente was to try and disperse the power of a single artistic decision-maker within a curatorial group composed of a variety of aesthetic points of view.

**BF: With many forms of dance competing for the same stage, have you perceived any competition among performers? I think here in particular of some instances in Europe where drastically opening the programming has led to situations almost of mutiny, as was seen at Berlin's Volksbühne during Chris Dercon's leadership.**

**DD:** In my personal practice, the reason that has never become an issue is because of my policy of programming the fullest possible range of artistic forms and visions. Programming what I have called traditional forms moving towards modernity has been only one of many, including new media, and conceptual art, which barely existed in the dance milieu in Montreal when we founded Tangente in 1980. There has never been a mutiny because I have always included this wide range of forms. I also feel that it is a disservice to the possibilities opened up by postmodernists to limit one's programming to a small sector of the artistic community.

Another policy that assures this openness is that of programming new choreographers each season. Maybe half of the artists chosen have not been on Tangente's stage before, assuring that we are not making a circular contract with artists over the years to come back every season. The competition for stage space is then not between dance forms but rather about the power and pertinence of one's own vision and the impact it could have on audiences.

**BF: If we are building a professional field of study and practice in live arts curation, how do you see that changing the field? How do you then respond to criticisms that it will start to destroy local forms of tacit knowledge around how to organize events? Is this canonization not going to start to normalize particular forms of organization and sideline others?**

**DD:** I will begin my answer to this tricky question with our local reality. The larger theaters in Quebec have persisted in working within a business model that was created many years ago by a group of impresarios looking for venues for rent, road houses, in which to present their rock stars, humorists and other large-scale commercially viable productions. This business model became anchored into our theater network in Quebec, as it has in other parts of North America

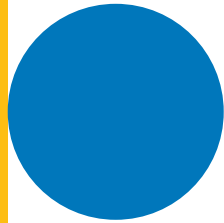
and much of Canada. These venues have had leaders whose business card says that they are both the general and artistic director but they usually have no background or education in the field of the arts, nor do they (for the most part) come from a professional arts practice. A first generation of these theater directors in Quebec are coming of age and giving way to a younger generation. I feel we are currently at a vital tipping point where real change is possible. In Quebec, these directors of larger venues have been classified differently by the local funding bodies, in contrast to the artist-curators who, like myself, created festivals or venues in response to the needs of their local arts communities with the goal of fostering contemporary experimentation.. The funders call the artist-curators '*les spécialisés*!' By this they mean that we are specialists in a single art form, which of course is not always true, as many of us program more than one art genre. The others I referred to are called '*les multidisciplinaires*,' or simply '*les multi*.' We '*specialists*' are grounded in our experience as artistic practitioners and if we have a university education it has been in our particular field of the arts. There has not previously existed an option to study '*artistic direction*' or curation, so we learned through trial-and-error. Our arts practice has for each of us been a kind of activist social work from which we eventually developed a festival, an event, a venue. It has also seemed to me that most of us are politically engaged, socially progressive. Since contemporary dance performances have not been lucrative, the larger multidisciplinary venues would rarely include them in their programming. To address the dire need for support and touring in contemporary dance, we artist-curators formed a national network called CanDance. We grew from 6, at the beginning, to around 50 dance presenters.

The problem with the large venues was that dance companies had stopped touring in Quebec entirely, because the directors would '*lose too much money*' on the effort, This became a crisis, as dance companies could not survive otherwise. So the companies began

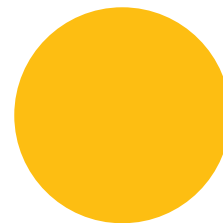
lobbying the Quebec government to subsidize dance touring which fostered the creation of an organization called La danse sur les routes du Québec. It is a model that has now been emulated in other provinces. Now we have Ontario Dances, Made in BC – Dance on Tour, Atlantic Moves and the Prairie Dance Circuit. These networks of theaters now participate in the CanDance meetings. We all have different worldviews and different discourses but the government is now requiring all theatres to develop an artistic mandate or vision. This marks a shift towards a different model for these larger venues, which are mostly municipal theaters.

One purpose for the introduction of curatorial education initiatives in the live arts is to effect change in the operational paradigm, the tone and temperament directing a municipal or state-funded venue. If the director is not educated in the arts then they might, at the very least, hire a curatorial consultant to help them formulate an artistic vision.

In general, because of what the practice of curating has been offering to the profession of artistic direction of venues and events, it is starting to gain more attention in these circles during conversations about the future of the arts world. In 2018 we brought together 30 Canadian artistic venue and event directors at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity, a gathering called the Interrarium Curators Symposium. After spending four intensive days enmeshed in a complex exchange of ideas on artistic visioning the way we talked together when we met as the CanDance network had markedly changed, with many concepts drawn from the practice of curation becoming more prominent in our conversations. Carrying forward the history of institutional critique, the dangers of the star curator, all the problems that emerged from within visual arts curatorship and finding solutions now that we know what the problems might be, means perhaps that we do not have to repeat them. Live arts curators can resist these hazards from the onset, and discuss them at the beginning. I would say the ideal



Carrying forward the history of institutional critique, the dangers of the star curator, all the problems that emerged from within visual arts curatorship and finding solutions now that we know what the problems might be, means perhaps that we do not have to repeat them. Live arts curators can resist these hazards from the onset, and discuss them at the beginning.



## institutions

curator for me is, at minimum, arts experienced; they have engaged with artistic practices on a personal level, they have done some reading and study in the field of the arts. At best, they have studied at a university level some of the rich literature in their field and participated in debates about what curating is, should, might, or could be.

**BF:** I think often about this question of how to teach curatorial practice, it is something that does not suit itself very well at all to any kind of lecture-based model, as it is such a situated practice. You can only really give your perspective based on what you know and based on the background and interests of the people who are interested in learning more about it.

**DD:** In terms of teaching, I was raised in the 'discussion model,' not the master lecturer style, in which the teacher is an authority figure.. For instance, I facilitated a class called Performing Arts Curation at the University of Quebec in Montreal (UQAM) in their Museum Studies Program in 2014. It was a three-hour class in 14 sessions. Jane Gabriels and I created a series of themes that emerged from the sparse, early literature in this field of study. For the first hour of the class, we invited local curators to create a panel and to talk about their own practices in relationship to our themes, for instance, how they understand the task of curating, how they have developed their curatorial projects and frameworks and what their criteria are for selecting artists. In the second hour we debated, together with the students, ideas that emerged from the assigned readings. The third hour we had them create their own fictional projects in small groups. It was very intense and generally devoted to peer-to-peer discussions. I do think that enriching the discourse at both the practical and theoretical levels, both inside presenting organizations and university arts departments, within symposium and workshop formats, will all contribute to keeping us honest, caring and insightful.

**BF:** Does training this ability and capacity to speak very eloquently about curatorial concepts not once again end up being putting the 'star' curator at the centre of discussion, however unwittingly?

**DD:** I think being cognizant of that danger in itself and having seen how it has operated in the visual arts is an advantage to this nascent field of discourse in the live arts. I hope we have the wisdom to take all of that institutional critique into our discourse and practice and hopefully move beyond it. How can we create an artistic ecosystem that is grounded in social justice, genuine caring and the desire for mutual understanding, for all participants? We must continuously ask ourselves these questions, something I try to do every day.

# BARBARA SCALES

interviewed by **Brandon Farnsworth and Vanessa Massera**

## BIO

---

**Barbara Scales** established Latitude 45 Arts Promotion, Inc. in Montreal in 1981. She works with artists who perform at the highest level, displaying creativity, engagement and daring. An internationalist by principle, her company has represented artists from Australia, Japan, Korea, Iran, Israel, Mexico, Argentina, France, the United Kingdom, Russia, South Africa, the United States and Indigenous artists of Canada. Ms Scales' academic studies were in philosophy with a Masters thesis on the following question: "What does it mean to say that art belongs to its time?" The question is present daily in her work with creative musicians.

Originally from New York City, Barbara Scales has made her home in Montreal since 1968 where she attended McGill University. Since 2014, she has been President of the Board of Directors of the Canadian Music Centre in Quebec. She has also served as an officer on the Boards of CINARS, NAPAMA, ISPA and in 2013, she presided the first IAMA conference outside of Europe. She is a founding Editor of the journal TURBA: The Journal for Global Practices in Live Arts Curation.

**Brandon Farnsworth:** Your booking agency Latitude 45 has a unique profile crossing many musical genres. Can you give us a brief overview of its activities?

**Barbara Scales:** Latitude 45 takes its name from the fact that Montreal is on the 45th parallel. It was started in 1981, following an encounter I had at a meeting of the Canadian League of Composers, where an artist asked me if I could help them organize a tour. I started working with that particular artist while learning about conferences, networks and presenters. All that stuff I had previously never known.

While at that same meeting of the Canadian League of Composers, I also remember hearing the music critics demeaning the composers, who were in the same room, like Claude Vivier and Michel-Georges Brégent. It was terrible to see that kind of pettiness in the music journalist milieu, as these critics were the people who were supposed to be introducing this music to the public. I thought that perhaps, because I had worked so hard to try to understand what was going on myself in my philosophy studies on aesthetics, that I could help to interpret the music of composers to a wider public. It is something that in retrospect seems to have made sense. But I had no background in business, nor any idea what I was embarking on!

Not long after, I was invited by Mireille Gagné, then head of the Canadian Music Centre, to be on their board. I had no idea what that was about either but I learned and have now been on the board for over 30 years. So I founded one of the organizations and the other I was invited to jump in midstream and for both I just had to start swimming.

**BF:** How do you select the artists you support through Latitude 45?

**BS:** I listen to the art and see if it says something to me. It may sound subjective but if the music speaks to me, if it is there because it has something to say,

then I become interested. I also listen to the person, to the human being behind the music, whether it is a composer or a performer. It is important to understand that the person has a sense of forward-motion in their lives and in their art, or some kind of connection to the world and the universe, which makes me interested in them moving forward.

Sometimes I take a chance, I may be persuaded by somebody, or by people who work for me, to consider an artist, but when I make a decision, it is based on my response and that is where my choices come from. Also, very rarely have I taken an artist whom I have not seen perform live, though it has happened. The same for artists whom I have not gotten to know through at least one conversation.

**BF:** How do you negotiate this open approach to choosing artists with the expectations of audiences and programmers?

**BS:** It is tricky. Programmers like to put themselves and their audiences into boxes. Audiences like it too, so that they can eliminate things from their radar. I address this by trying to stimulate curiosity, to focus on aesthetic qualities like originality, freshness, personality, intelligence, power, playfulness—words that I hope cross genres, and that I hope come across to the people I am selling to.

When I first started Latitude 45 we encountered a different kind of challenge in this struggle of getting people to think across genres. Canada Council at that time only funded classical music, a restriction I found very offensive. I knew artists working in all kinds of genres and felt that they could not just restrict themselves in that way. The point of a funding body like the Canada Council is to be able to assess the quality of the work, not its category. We pushed for them to do this and we won the battle, but it meant that there was less money in the end for supporting classical music.

**Vanessa Massera: How has the CMC changed and adapted as an organization in recent years?**

**BS:** The Canadian Music Centre, both in Quebec and nationally, is a service organization for composers, for the music milieu and for society. It is not a representative for the composers, rather it is a repository of information, a centre for interaction between people who self-identify as members of this milieu. Composers are members and anybody else can be a supporter. It is a non-profit and establishes its right to that status largely through its commitment to education.

Over the past 15 or so years, I have been involved with the national CMC's development of a new strategic plan. Part of the idea was to be not just a library for scores, becoming more dynamic in its relationship with live performance and creating a different kind of relationship to the public. As a result, we have now developed and launched education programs that are focused on youth, schools, etc. My definition of education for CMC Quebec, and I have tried to stress this in the national organization, consists of three different areas. The first is education for the general public about what Quebec composers do and what music has been written in the history of the province. The second focuses on education for youth to be better acquainted with this part of their cultural heritage. Last, we have education for composers, encompassing anything from new technologies to copyright and distribution issues.

**VM: How have you personally adapted your work in light of the ongoing pandemic?**

**BS:** In March, I started inviting people to have regular conversations via video chat to discuss what on earth was happening, and how we would get through for what back then we imagined would not be more than three months. I spoke with musicians for whom all gigs had been cancelled, with composers whose premieres had been cancelled, and with ensembles who could

not even sit in the same room, etc.

In July, I applied for a digital literacy grant from the Canada Council for the Arts, noting in the application that increasing numbers of people were doing streaming, hybrid concerts, all with varying levels of quality, and having come to the realization that digital was not going to go away. I met with everyone from the Medici TV channel to film festival organizers who had transitioned their events online, learning along the way all about production, marketing, metadata, discoverability, platforms and distribution. All the steps in between the performer and the music-loving consumer. I realized that digital literacy was not just about what to do with the microphone and camera, and getting someone to pay for it out of charity, it was also about all the knowledge required to make the business work behind those steps.

By the time we got the grant, there were so many courses on so many platforms already available that we had to shift our focus. With our project manager, we started compiling lists, and making video capsules so that anybody facing these challenges, whether they be an artist, producer, or manager, could figure out

**I listen to the art and see  
if it says something to me.  
It may sound subjective  
but if the music speaks to  
me, if it is there because  
it has something to say,  
then I become interested.**

what are the right questions to ask and where to look for support. At the Canadian Music Centre, we are also discussing developing platforms for composers to talk about their work, their oeuvre, and having performers talk about composers who are no longer with us. Behind this is the conviction that the digital pivot is not just a short term thing, but rather that it is here to stay.

This is a very important part of where music is going right now, and something we need to stay focused on both at the Canadian Music Centre and with the artists I work with at Latitude 45. For the CMC, the issue is finding donors and sponsors, while for the artists the question is how to monetize it and how do we get people to license or rent these films. In terms of building up networks, I have spoken to a few major centres for chamber music in different countries who have said that even once their halls open again, there is so much good material available on video that they will want to continue to use it as a resource to share with their audiences.

**BF: I want to shift gears slightly and talk briefly about your involvement with the newly-launched journal Turba, which represents, to an extent, a professionalization of the discussions around live arts curation. Can you speak to the tension in such a project between highlighting voices and homogenizing them?**

**BS:** I have lived through and experienced the narrow focus of many of the 'deciders' like Boulez or Stockhausen and the Darmstadt School. Though it may remain to an extent with some influential critics, that approach seems to have just crumbled around the turn of the millennium.

My hope is that people who are curators of performance will not necessarily be leaders of another movement, but rather think about how something works or sounds or feels, how a work can tie into our world, this community, a people, knowledge,

I spoke with musicians for whom all gigs had been cancelled, with composers whose premieres had been cancelled, and with ensembles who could not even sit in the same room, etc.

information technology of our time, etc. I also think that curation comes in many forms. The first line of curation is an artist picking a program, and saying that there is a reason for them to do a certain group of pieces together, or wanting to explore the works of one composer. They can articulate it, but the most important act is their choosing of it.

To your question, it is sort of like learning languages. How many different stories are told in English in the world? If people attend a musical program with a sense of wanting to meet a moment through trying to understand a work, a place, a time, then you are going to have that many different ideas about what to present. It will not be homogenous because people will come with their own dignity and their own thought processes. We will have different stories, different programming, different curating.

**VM: What are your hopes for the growth of New Music in Quebec? How do you see this field recovering after the pandemic?**

**BS:** It is almost shocking how little contemporary

music exists in Quebec outside of Montreal. I hope that insisting on a vocabulary that is more human, talking about characteristics like power, fun, or whatever else instead of always relating music to certain traditions, can be a way of getting people also outside of Montreal interested.

What is really important is supporting artists, who are the ambassadors for new music. This is also where my work representing artists and at the Canadian Music Centre intersect. It does not have to be only Quebec composers by any means, but artists who can really get music across in a way that is exciting and compelling are so important for the development of new music.

I am also very excited about this app by the composer Yves Daoust that the CMC has helped develop called the Fonofone, which allows kids to synthesize sounds and make music. We need to do more of that kind of project, going into classrooms and creating sounds the way kids learn how to read books, having them create in different musical languages, and improvising and not being afraid of it.

I look forward to the work being done digitally by really fine artists having more exposure through broadcasters like Télé-Québec, through more touring and, of course, on the internet. There are also a lot of new opportunities to be created through education, establishing festivals and finding interesting moments of cross-pollination. Finally, we need to support composers working with other art forms like film, but also dance, circus, television, video games, etc.



My hope is that people who are curators of performance will not necessarily be leaders of another movement, but rather think about how something works or sounds or feels, how a work can tie into our world, this community, a people, knowledge, information technology of our time





+FOLLOWUP

# GABRIEL DHARMOO

interviewed by **Vanessa Massera**

*Translated from French by Vanessa Massera and Gabriel Dharmoo*

## BIO

---

**Gabriel Dharmoo** is a composer, vocalist, improviser and researcher.

**Vanessa Massera:** Your approach and your artistic style are recognised for their exchange between different languages and their ability to integrate different traditions and cultures. How do you navigate all of this to be able to be inspired by these cultures without falling in the trap of cultural appropriation?

**Gabriel Dharmoo:** When I engage with culture, in general, everything should rest on a genuine engagement with the sources of inspiration. In my work, these stem from an identity formation process related to heritages that were distanced, erased and deformed through immigration and displacement. The Indian population in Trinidad and Tobago stems from the post-slavery Indian indenture system. My engagement with that specific culture is at that level of family history. Other cultural sources of inspiration arise in my work and I do touch upon other cultures. I have a flexible attitude towards what can inspire me, as well as how it may or may not be reflected in my work itself. For example, if I am inspired by elements that I heard in Vietnamese music that may be reflected in my art but it is never lifted or obviously stated. I believe there is a certain part of freedom in artistic expression, which allows one to be interested in something with a curious spirit. Ethical problems would arise if, for example, I proclaimed myself the cultural ambassador of a music that does not belong to me, self-identifying with it to the extent of conveying some form of authority, or trying to frame my artistic approach around this music, in a forced or disingenuous way.

It becomes entangled because appropriation in our field is not necessarily about financial gain but it may nevertheless be a power gain. It is a way to enrich an artistic proposition and, in our field, a strong artistic proposition is one way to gain power or be recognized. My key elements are engagement, sincerity and a critical self-reflection on how we benefit or gain power and recognition.

My work is positioned towards imaginary, or permeable spaces, where the existence of grey areas is embraced, or at least accepted. What I find difficult with the discussion on cultural appropriation is that it can be very uncompromising, especially in social media and call-out culture, to the detriment of the cause itself. There is not enough differentiation between cases of problematic cultural appropriation—the “bad” kind of appropriation—and occurrences of natural—yet still complex—cultural exchange. This equivocation allows some people to defend blatantly questionable cases of appropriation, by bringing up examples where cultural exchange has been deemed generally acceptable or accepted (i.e. referring to a musical style born from the mingling of two cultures—without explaining or describing circumstances, power relations between the said cultures, the time-span of the transformation, etc.).

I adapt how I talk about cultural appropriation according to whom I am talking to. If asked my opinion by a white person who wants to explore another culture, and particularly if I detect a need for some sort of approval or leniency from my part, I will be a lot more uncompromising in how I caution them—I would also assume they will ask other people of colour until they get the answer they want to hear. I might detect more noble intentions from someone else, with a similar positionality. Perhaps the project they propose displays more sincere intentions. It could lead to a fruitful cultural exchange, it could hold potential for beneficial repercussions on a larger scale, or perhaps the level of inspiration is reasonable or well balanced. I guess I would be more nuanced and try to provoke a process of constructive self-reflection about the privileges that allow them to explore these sources of inspiration—sometimes their access is much easier (financially, psychologically, geographically) than for people who stem from the culture of inspiration itself. They will never be granted an official authorization, from my part or someone else, that allows them to proceed comfortably. They are bound to receive critical feedback and they

should be ready to listen, change, to yield – even if they have consulted many people, even if they have knowledge or training in the art form they are drawing inspiration from. Why should one expect it to be a comfortable journey?

**VM:** Your work investigates notions such as post-colonialism. What is your approach to expressing those questions with composition and performance?

**GD:** I prefer talking about coloniality, because post-colonialism in Canada has not actually been achieved. We still have colonialist attitudes and actions towards our First Nations. When citizens do not have access to drinking water, it is a sign that we have not yet really achieved a so-called post-colonialist era. Nowadays, especially in the arts world, when we are talking about decolonisation or post-colonialism, we are not only talking about issues regarding settler colonialism versus indigeneity. We have in mind a broader scope of social issues and these terms come to address the general decentering of power. The loose use of the term decolonization broadens the categories of people who are at the margins of power, including women, queer people, people of colour, Black people and so on. While I still use the word decolonization to speak broadly of different forms of social justice, it is out of respect for specific indigenous issues that I prefer coloniality or decoloniality, which better acknowledge the multiple facets of power and oppression. If we want to de-center, we should not swap one center for another. We should be conscious of the multiple fights and do our part where we can.

So where does coloniality come into play in the new music scene? I have written an article for *Intersections* specifically on this, which is pending publication later this year. There is much room for a nuanced, critical and complex discussion about this but without going too far in that direction in this moment, I can share a few thoughts. I have come to reject many values

and notions which often drove my training and my professional career. Of course, many other artists have come to similar conclusions. I am questioning the entanglement with a Eurocentric heritage, the ocular-centric primacy of the score and the conception of art as a self-sufficient object that explains itself. Moreover I reject the implication that having an audience, the actual process of sharing your work with an audience, is of secondary importance, or that it does not matter at all. Even if many people work in many different ways, the scene's institutions still value a certain type of people and artistic approaches. I do not wish to vilify scores or written music, not at all, but decentralisation should come from many angles. We need to embrace a multitude of approaches.

I increasingly try to exercise my art and creativity outside the new music scene, so that I can explore other social dynamics, audiences and sub-cultures. This first translated into an exploration of live-arts, interdisciplinarity and performance art. However, the most bold, or concrete step away from the new music scene I have taken was towards the non-institutional (and queer!) art form of drag. My drag persona Bijuriya is inspired by South Asian, Indian cultures—she explores the relatively narrow intersection between queer and “brown.” My reflections on the demographics of our audiences and “who listens to our stuff” became very important. I realized my reticence towards inviting certain people to my concerts, knowing they would not have the cultural references to “get it.” Race, class and culture are entangled in those questions. I find that sad, unacceptable and shameful. I realized I was ashamed of being a new music composer or being linked to this scene, because I knew very well that many people I interact with would not know what that even is. These are friends who are either queer or people of colour, eager for culture, arts, knowledge—why can I not see them as a potential audience? I think they would appreciate what I do, with a whole lot of contextualization—but would they also appreciate the experience of being in those spaces, those events,

these contexts, structures and institutions? Those were the types of reflections that led me to explore drag. I started the project in secrecy, mostly because I did not want to have to consider the expectations from people from the new music scene. I created another fanbase with that project, with Instagram, with hashtags and by becoming friends with people in the community. My drag increasingly crosses over with my interdisciplinary arts practice, including weird voice or sound treatments, or strangeness in other forms. These “quirky” elements stem from my own personality, my work in new music and my relationship with art history but I blur or change the genealogy of where they come from and the ecosystem of cultural references they resonate with. People who do not have a typical contemporary music profile appreciate the innovative or creative aspects of my drag. How refreshing, honestly.

Striving for diversity, I observe how organizations’ go-to thinking is centered around ‘I need more of that type of audience to diversify,’ or ‘I need more of that type of composer.’ As an individual, I have asked myself these questions: ‘Can I extend my activities beyond the scene’s borders to find inspiration? Do I belong to other communities, subcultures? Is my art making compatible with what these communities might care about, seek, crave, want or need? Can I create art keeping them in mind? Can I still be myself? How much should I undo my training or reflexes? How much can I grow through these challenges?’ I am truly in a process of self-distancing from the new music scene right now. I increasingly feel that it holds itself up with artificial and mysterious structures, ones we do not need to conserve.

**VM:** It seems you are really building your own new scene with drag in this attempt to steer your art away from coloniality.

**GD:** Yes, but there are issues related to coloniality there too. No scene is really exempt from that but the issues are different. Compared to new music, or

I am truly in a process of self-distancing from the new music scene right now. I increasingly feel that it holds itself up with artificial and mysterious structures, ones we do not need to conserve.

institution-based art in general, the scene has a totally differently relationship to class and access. Drag's origins, especially if we look at ball culture, was linked to marginalization, to the creativity of Black and Latinx outcasts. Of course, it is expensive to buy make-up and costumes but craftiness, inventiveness and creativity are praiseworthy, achieving a lot from little. Nowadays, in mainstream culture, there are problems of whitewashing queer history and drag excellence, there are diversity problems in different cities, sometimes linked to who has control of the booking, who owns the spaces (clubs), etc. Anyway, having done drag for almost two years, I have observed more actual impact on audiences than when I have composed a piece for months, only to have it played in a concert with a small audience. I try to not be too cynical in regard to new music but right now it is sane for me to really question what it represents.

**VM: How do you position yourself as a Québec artist with questions of diversity? What is your relationship with under-represented communities? How do you prefer identifying yourself? What are your hopes for the future?**

**GD:** That is very complicated for me. The fact is I am a racialized person working in the scene but I actually belong to the scene. What I do belongs to the definitions and delimitations of the genre. Say I am invited to speak about diversity at some event, panel or in a consultative role, I am being asked *because* I am part of this so-called diversity—I am an example, a relatively rare example but my credibility comes from years of being an insider to the scene, after years of experiences, accomplishments or collaborations pretty much compatible to what is expected from the scene. There is something a bit artificial about pretending that we have a diverse scene because “here, we have this person, that person, and Gabriel Dharmoo”... in the end, I am an insider. A reluctant one, at that!

For the new music scene, my hope is that we manage to get disentangled from the legacy of classical music and Eurocentric traditions, especially the disproportionate emphasis on skill, virtuosity and technique. Contemporary arts, visual arts, make room for so many more artistic approaches, conceptual frameworks, aesthetics, mediums, ways of doing... and these can be rooted in different traditions and cultures. I do not want to idealize the contemporary visual arts milieu, which is linked to other power structures—the art market, for example—but if you compare the two scenes according to the remaining traces of Eurocentric heritage, the walls around new music are much higher. The definition of an artistic approach to new music could be articulated around a desire for curiosity, innovation, questioning—regardless of the background, culture or tradition of origin. This artistic approach exists outside our scene, in hip hop, electronic music, independent music...but also by Indigenous artists, Black artists, artists from different cultures or stemming from different musical traditions. Why is there this discrepancy between our scene and their work, which is admired and recognized as valuable and innovative by so many music and art lovers?

**VM: Could you say that you would ideally like an eclectic scene?**

**GD:** I want to see art that interests me and that manages to surprise me but I have no expectations as to whether this art will come from the new music scene or elsewhere. The quality of the work is important but the sincerity, richness and relevance of the proposition is of ultimate importance to me. I have little affinity with artists who hardly reflect on their social relevance, or the power of their critical outlook. Yes, ideally, I want art that is engaged, edgy and surprising!

For the new music scene, my hope is that we manage to get disentangled from the legacy of classical music and Eurocentric traditions, especially the disproportionate emphasis on skill, virtuosity and technique.

---

FOLLOW UP SECOND EDITION

with Gabriel Dharmoo by Vanessa Massera

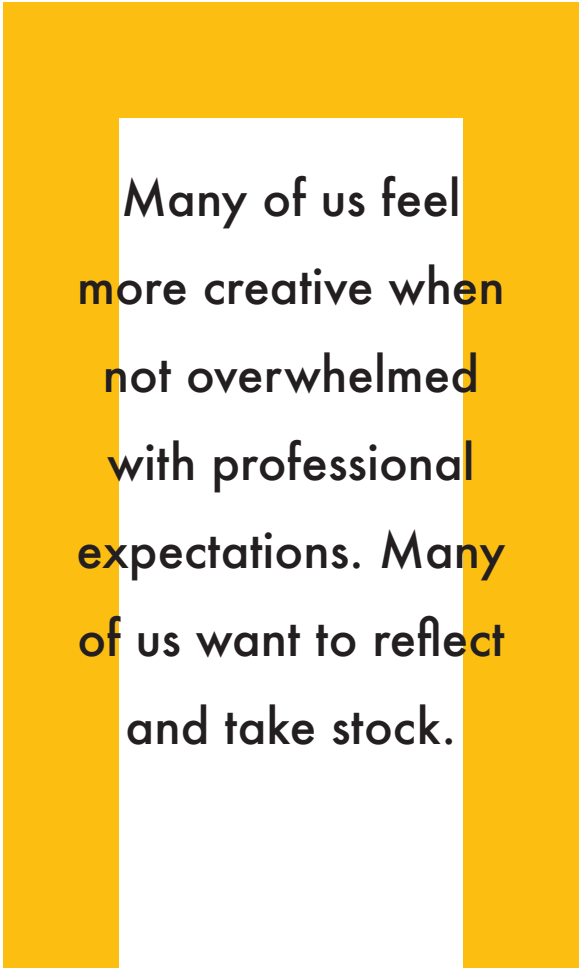
**Vanessa Massera:** Last time we spoke, a major concern of yours was how you navigate different scenes and it was clear that you wanted to distance yourself from conventional institutions and channels for new music. How do you feel that these institutions fared this year with the major COVID-19 lockdowns?

**Gabriel Dharmoo:** From the early months of the pandemic, my instinct told me things would not go back to normal—whatever that means—for at least a year. When I say “my instinct,” of course it is based on the news, expert statements and what we already knew of the historically long 1918 pandemic. I was dubious when Spring events were shifted to Summer, to Fall, to Winter... With hindsight, I realize I was not a pessimist; I was just a realist, managing my expectations and hoping I could be proven wrong.

I totally understand why many individual artists and most of the cultural leadership, both inside and outside the new music scene, persevered with rescheduling and advocated for the importance, necessity and value of the arts...but now we are at a point where we have to reassess the scale of the problem and our lack of control over it.

I am/have been involved in projects where the leadership was monitoring the situation with empathy, sensitivity and reason; the creative process and the overall expectations were allowed to shift and adapt. That is my model now, whenever I find myself in a position of leadership for projects involving other collaborators. Beyond that, from what I have seen and discussed with many colleagues now, leadership is often still attached to “the show must go on” mentality and it has been increasingly off-putting to

me. According to a recent article (Josée Lapointe: *Le casse-tête des reports de spectacles*, La Presse – Jan 11, 2021), the showbiz industry here in Quebec has been rescheduling lots of shows and complex tours knowing very well that they may not happen, but part of their rationale is to stay eligible for provincial funding meant for economic recovery programs in the cultural sector. In our much smaller and modest scene, I have never been given this reason when contacted for rescheduling. I understand that some artists are trying to get all the work they can get, but I think leaderships underestimate the anxiety and fatigue this whole ordeal can cause on other artists (i.e. we are all wired differently!). The message is that we must do absolutely everything we can to make things happen—things that are most often out of our control—otherwise we are perceived as lazy, hypochondriacs, or uncooperative. This insensitive and business-like approach is sometimes rooted in abusive power dynamics: putting gig-workers in tough situations, facing impossible dilemmas (or implicitly, ultimatums), overlooking logistical details



Many of us feel  
more creative when  
not overwhelmed  
with professional  
expectations. Many  
of us want to reflect  
and take stock.

around travel/accommodation, assuming individuals (or their partners, families) are not at higher risk, etc. This creates resentment, a very tense working environment and poor conditions for art making. One section of the milieu is ready (and mentally equipped) to do all that extra (often futile) work in the midst of a global catastrophe, but their efficiency is not always compatible with independent artists and cultural workers' realities and mental health.

Financial necessity is behind most of our choices and, of course, basic income or more governmental support to navigate the crisis would make us artists less desperate to work. But even with that in mind, I think institutions take/took for granted that *all of us* want to keep working, stay busy and earn money at any cost. By now, I have had enough conversations to know that many independent artists felt a strange sense of relief when things slowed down. Many of us feel awkward promoting live performances we assume will be postponed or cancelled. Many of us feel more creative when not overwhelmed with professional expectations. Many of us want to reflect and take stock. Many of us smirked when capitalism showed its cracks.

I have grown both more appreciative *and* more wary of different institutions, collaborators or types of creative processes. I can definitely see how this will influence future artistic and professional choices I make.

**VM:** Do you think your diverse networks have helped you carry on as an artist? Do you see any hope in those networks supporting each other and creating a new space where arts can exist online, safe from any sanitary restrictions?

**GD:** Absolutely. In the face of so many cancelled events and projects, I have put more energy into my drag than I normally would have been able to. During the pandemic, drag has been where I felt

the most independent, creative and free. Usually a drag number performed in a club would focus on one costume, one song and have limited possibilities in terms of stage design. With the opportunity for costume changes, sets, angles, videography and creative editing, virtual drag took my drag practice to new heights. I am fortunate to have a video-editing partner and we have created about a dozen videos for virtual drag shows organized locally (Montreal) and globally. I strengthened my ties with the international community of drag artists of South Asian and pan-Asian descent. I was also part of official Montreal Pride events, with some being televised.

Regarding my work in new music, I have only produced a few works meant to be shared with online audiences—some were personal initiatives, some were commissions, but all were self-produced videos of vocal improvisation including makeup and styling. I wanted to create art that could engage my new music audience/network, as well as my drag following. My series of "Portraits" (Qūlps, Rwoogh, Bymnef, Daçji) where fictional characters are brought to life through voice, body and makeup really bridged both worlds. Keen to stay creatively active and not discern too much between my diverse networks, I advertised my drag events to my personal network and shared a few personal projects to my drag following. The line is definitely getting blurry—I love it.

I have been less inclined to adapt live projects to an online format, it simply involves too much compromise. The beautiful feeling of experiencing art together in a physical space, with other bodies and minds just cannot be replaced. As an audience member, the most successful online events, projects or pieces I have witnessed were the ones where the use of an online platform managed to make sense on a conceptual level. That is what I have tried to achieve in my own videos, but without much know-how on how to elevate the genre, or how to use virtual technologies in clever ways.

Our vocal ensemble Phth was also able to safely work

If issues about race and diversity have increasingly become part of the collective consciousness and public discussions, it stems from just how much racist violence actually made it on the news during the pandemic.

on a research-creation project with visual artist Beth Frey—it was definitely a highlight of the Fall. We cannot wait to share the results of that project with audiences, even if we still have to reflect on the best ways this can be achieved. We are thankful we happened to be working on this very visually appealing project, because we see the potential of it faring well online.

Even when/if the new music scene adapts or creates new and exciting spaces for online events, we will remain challenged by the limitations of social media (algorithms deciding what content and promotional materials people will see) and the fact that audiences are so saturated by online content. In a scene where audiences are significantly made up of our own colleagues, I am not sure everyone from the community will have as much energy to support their peers than they would have in a pre-pandemic era, when one of the perks of attending concerts was the opportunity to network and socialize. My own capacity for screen time has definitely diminished.

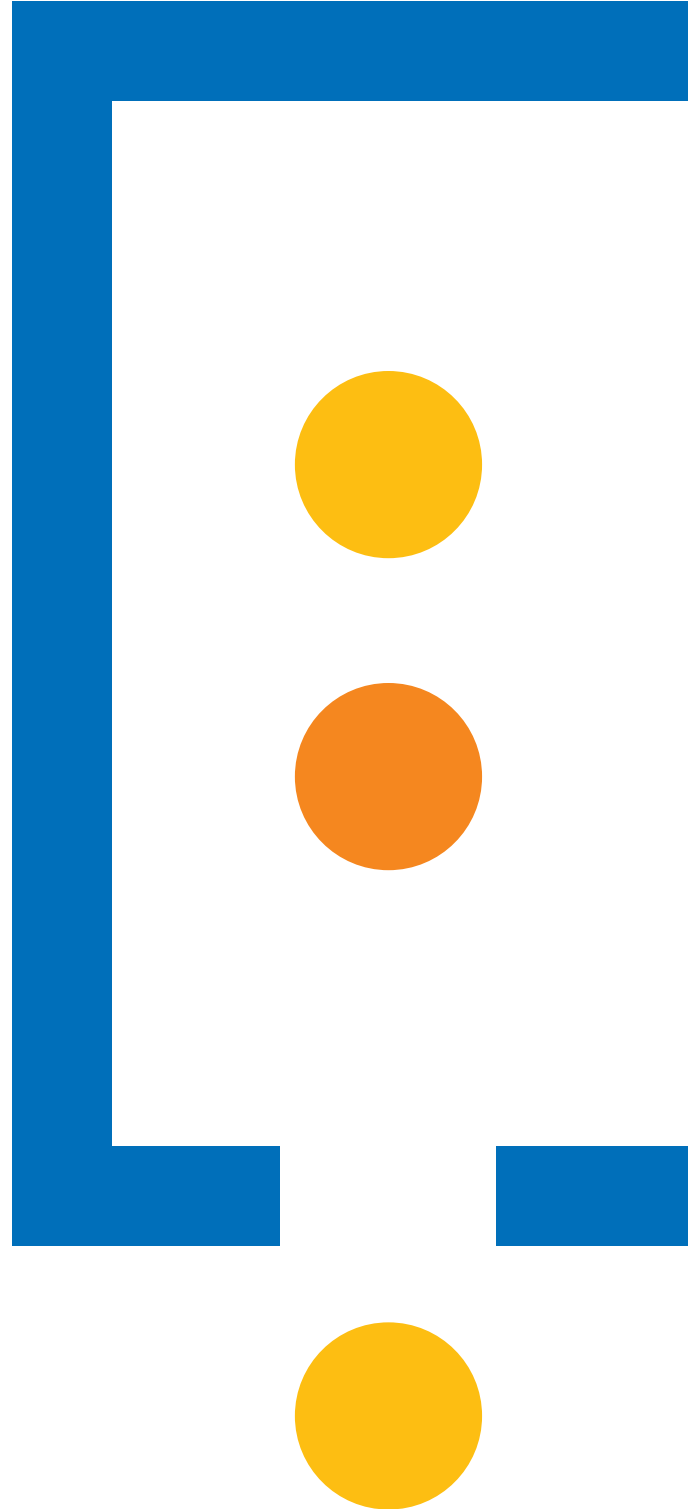
**VM:** How has representation of diversity in

**the arts been impacted by this pandemic? Have you seen some shifts or critical situations that should be addressed?**

**GD:** If issues about race and diversity have increasingly become part of the collective consciousness and public discussions, it stems from just how much racist violence actually made it on the news *during* the pandemic. Most linked to the pandemic itself is the sizable increase of East Asian racism, simply because COVID-19 originated in China. Then came the huge momentum of the Black Lives Matter movement—the lockdown was probably crucial in more people listening and mobilizing. The shooting of Chantel Moore in New Brunswick, the death of Joyce Echaquan in a Joliette hospital, the death of Regis Korchinski-Paquet in Toronto, the Mi'kmaq fisheries situation in Nova Scotia and more incidents (they do not always make it on the news but these, fortunately, have) revealed the ugly side of colonialism and racism towards First Nations in Canada. And most recently the harrowing double-standard in police brutality was

made evident when comparing all the above with how authorities handled Trump supporters' storming of the Capitol.

When it comes to how all this impacts the arts and the new music scene's engagement to promote diversity...I do not know. I do remember how I felt on Black Tuesday, when many people and organizations posted black squares on social media, in solidarity with BLM. I remember observing how silence from very "classical" institutions—or sometimes their forced or hypocritical statements—pointed to the flagrant lack of diversity in their programming, audiences and their efforts regarding accessibility and outreach. Again, I do not want to conflate the importance of Black Lives Matter (a question of life and death) with representation of diversity, which is about access to opportunities and which encompasses all Indigenous and racialized groups. These are distressing and horrific situations, hopefully the silver lining is that people start or continue to think differently, to self-reflect, to self-educate, to call out racism without hesitation (constructively, with care and perspective—that is how people from dominant cultures tend to listen), to recognize their privileges and to start making concrete changes at different scales. At an institutional level, it is up to the individuals in leadership roles to do that work. But we cannot underestimate just how much passive and active resistance there is when it comes to provoking meaningful change. It definitely takes time and even if I am a patient person, there is a certain amount of change that I have stopped waiting for. I am much more interested in new ideas, structures, creative processes and projects that are based on values I adhere to, or strive towards. Those are not coming from institutions with deep roots in coloniality.



# ANNE HILDE NESET

interviewed by **Brandon Farnsworth**

## BIO

---

**Anne Hilde Neset** is Director at Kunstnernes Hus art centre. She is one of the founders of contemporary art agency Electra Productions in London, and was Deputy Editor of the British music magazine *The Wire* for many years. She took over as Artistic Director of nyMusikk in Oslo in 2012 and founded the festivals Off The Page Oslo and Only Connect. She is also one of the presenters of the *Late Junction* programme on BBC Radio 3 and writes essays and journalism regularly (*The Wire*, *Frieze*, *Morgenbladet*, *Klassekampen*) and lectures internationally. She has curated festivals, events and exhibitions in London, Barcelona, Copenhagen and Oslo.

**Brandon Farnsworth:** Your biography frequently crosses between different forms of music and contemporary art. Can you talk about your background? Are there any threads which connect these different areas of activity?

**Anne Hilde Neset:** I have worked in different institutions between art and music and noticed there is a constant conversation between the fields. In many ways, I have worked to bring the arts into music and music into the arts. In my mind, an arts institution can be all sorts of things: it can be a magazine, a music organization, a festival, a physical arts institution like the one I am running now, or even a record or book shop, but it does not necessarily need to have all those things in place.

After I wrote my masters', I started working in two places, the Institute for Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London and Rough Trade Records. Both places were very different from each other but both engaged deeply with the arts on a broad level. Within the framework of selling records, the shop was a place for knowledge, dedication, dissemination, live music and not least exploration. For me, it was a brilliant school, learning by listening to music, meeting musicians, organising in-store concerts, reading about music and talking about music non-stop. In the shop I learned about distribution channels, the way the dissemination of music actually happens once it hits the public and how marginal musics were flowing through alternative systems, which was incredibly interesting.

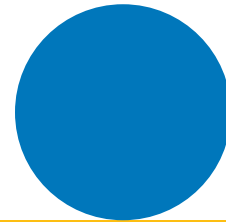
At the ICA I was doing administrative work, so I got to engage with all the different departments – film, talks, exhibition, theatre and live arts. At that time, the ICA had a big focus on not only visual arts in their galleries but also theatre and live arts. They had a big cinema programme and a very active film department as well as a hugely impressive talks program, so I was able to be in that space where all sorts of ideas

would intersect – arts in different forms – then be at Rough Trade the next day, where artists like Aphex Twin would sit and listen to David Tudor at the listening station for half the day and musical worlds would meet. At the ICA you might see Vivienne Westwood browsing the bookshop or JG Ballard passing by on his way to present a talk. To me, all of this was somehow connected. Different avenues of arts, fashion, literature, theory, music – meeting at a vital moment in a world capital with astonishing arts production. I came from a background in theory, which is kind of one step above the making of stuff: it was a search for meaning. Since then, I have experienced quite a wide register of what art is and how and where it can be presented.

After that period, I landed a job at *The Wire* and stayed for about 16 years. I had different positions within the magazine, I was a project manager and curated events but most of the time I spent writing and editing. It is an entirely independent publication and a very small staff. Media is generally something that reacts, writing after the fact. But I always thought *The Wire* was also about making things happen, because of the dedicated community and engagement with all genres of music and sound art around it. With that in mind, we started curating stages at big festivals like Roskilde and Sonar. We started up *The Wire Soundsystem*, a DJ duo which I was very active in – another way of disseminating and curating music.

My colleague Lina Dzuverovic and I founded Electra in 2001, an agency that tried to dissolve the boundaries between music, contemporary art, performance and concerts. We worked with big institutions like the Tate and the Barbican injecting a type of dynamic performance based programming. For example, we did bigger productions at the Tate like a big Christian Marclay event, *The Sounds of Christmas* (2004), a show based on the artist's astounding collection of Christmas LPs. We also partook in a John Cage *Musicircus* event and did a lot of coupling up between visual artists, wanting to get in touch with good

Lina and I sat down and wrote down every female artist, sound artist, composer and musician working in this kind of slightly undefined field, from transgressive rock to Hildegard van Bingen, in a brainstorming session in the garden.



musicians for art films, installations and so on, as there is often a lack of knowledge between those fields. We also worked with now very successful artists like Lawrence Abu Hamdan, Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz, people whose careers have really developed in the meantime.

Our biggest project was *Her Noise* (2005), which was an important part of the way I think about curating. It was an exhibition at the South London Gallery whose impetus was to reveal a hidden history of female composers and sound artists that had been excluded from music history, curated by Lina and myself. I had read Michael Nyman's book *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond* (1974), which was a much used textbook in academia on the history of experimental music, actively used for students even now, and for a long time pretty much the only book covering this field. I was shocked to see that the book only had passing references to a few female composers—fleeting mentions of Annea Lockwood and Pauline Oliveros. We were thinking that this was something

fundamentally wrong and we needed to address it in some way.

Lina and I sat down and wrote down every female artist, sound artist, composer and musician working in this kind of slightly undefined field, from transgressive rock to Hildegard van Bingen, in a brainstorming session in the garden, noting it all down on a piece of paper. It was almost a kind of outburst, responding to the lack of women in musical history. We did a lot of research for the show, collecting reading matter, fanzines, records, tapes, interviews, articles, etc., from within this field. We started a resource room within the South London Gallery, which we made an integral part of the *Her Noise* situation, where people could dive into this largely undocumented world.

The list of artists we made became a map, the *Her Noise Map*, which became integral to the show. The show started with interviewing artists, people like Kim Gordon, Diamanda Galás, Lydia Lunch, Marina Rosenfeld and many others working at the

intersection of experimental music/composition. We commissioned Kaffe Matthews to make a sculpture called *Sonic Bed, London* (2005) and worked with Christine Kubisch who did her electrical walks. The artist Hayley Newman did a Fluxus tribute—Fluxus had many female artists who often went uncredited in favour of the more famous male artists.

Before we found a home at the South London Gallery, many institutions were not interested in taking this show, as it was just seen as too marginal. The opposite was true; it was hugely successful and was reviewed in lots of major newspapers, probably because the two quite specialist strands made a strong case. In the end, the University of the Arts London acquired the materials in the archive, which are now called the *Her Noise Archive* and used by MA students in Sound Arts every year. PhDs have also been written about the archive, which we are tremendously happy about.

**BF: What are the parallels between your time in London and your approach to running nyMusikk?**

**AHN:** When I started with nyMusikk, I came into an organization that had been run mainly by composers. Not being a composer myself, I came with a different approach. I was primarily a kind of ‘specialist listener,’ a curator and a writer.

I looked at the history of the organisation closely—I also edited a book about its history during my time there—and saw an institution that had managed to survive through so many years, so many epochs of contemporary music. I wanted it to be stronger, bigger and more impactful for people who were outside of the academy and people who were not specialists in new music. I also saw many parallels between composition and experimental film, performance art and all sorts of contemporary art that I wanted to highlight. The question was how to look at some of the lines between experimental film and composition,

or between bossa nova and noise, for example. Looking at connections and how contemporary music binds with other arts, rather what makes it separate, could let people be more open minded about coming to a contemporary music gig. I was quite ambitious, I felt we should have full houses with queues outside for everything we did, which we did manage on some occasions.

I founded the Only Connect festival whose ethos lay in combining and making connections, like the name suggests. The festival would sometimes be themed and would be very wide in terms of different musical expression. We made a music festival based around an author, ideas around ‘the deep’ and so on, and we would include film screenings and talks and it was our experience that the public visiting the festival broadened.

A lot is about communication and how contemporary music understands itself. Contemporary music has a way of talking about itself that can be very insular. You cannot assume that everyone has been to Darmstadt, or that you can drop, say, a name like Mauricio Kagel into a press release and think that the reader knows what you are talking about. You have to think instead why this piece is relevant, why does this piece matter in the larger scale of things, why should it be prioritised before all the things that we can do with our day, whether that is watching Netflix, walking in the woods, whatever, what can it give people? I love the complexities, the difficulty of some music and the challenge of trying to talk about why it matters.

I also imported a festival to Norway that I started up while at *The Wire* called *Off the Page*, a music festival without music. It was a chance to meet artists and to understand their mind as they were making it. We had lots of composers, writers and thinkers on stage participating in conversations, interviews, panels from a broad array of genres. We could have a dub sound system demo and a lecture on

## institutions

bass then go on to an interview about folk music and move on to new composition and improvisation. Interesting connections are often revealed in these kinds of on stage interviews with artists. For example, I interviewed Arto Lindsay and it turns out he is an expert on contemporary dance, which was fascinating to hear about in relation to his music. It is about finding the common ground between different fields, staying open and being educated.

Another job I had was for many years being a presenter on Radio 3 for a program called *Late Junction*. That was another way of educating 'by stealth.' It is a popular late-night listening program with no genre restrictions. I could play exactly what I wanted, a dream job. It was fun to pick out a few bits of information that might somehow unlock the music and make a listener prick up her ears, but you needed to be careful not to become the teacher in the room, because then the program would not become what it needed to be. You need to be very selective about how you do the "education" part.

**BF:** This issue you are describing seems to be a defining difference between contemporary art institutions and music institutions. What is the path forward for classical music institutions that are receiving a huge amount of funding but struggle to stay relevant to audiences? How can they start to work on a new solution?

**AHN:** One thing I would not advocate is a 'dumbing down' of the programming and focusing only on audience numbers, but instead trying to present interesting and great programmes and make sure it is unlocked for the public. People need to understand why 'I' should be interested in this and why it matters in the world, not just why it matters for the institution, for the conductor or for the musician. Also, to find context for talking about it, to contextualize the work, either within society or within other fields of art or within its own field in an open way, and to expand

the repertoire to include a wider range of music and make connections to different parts of the world.

Institutions need to find ways to reach schools – because there you find all kids. When cultural institutions do family events very often the kids who get to experience them already have access to culture at home. We need to find ways to expose all children to culture.

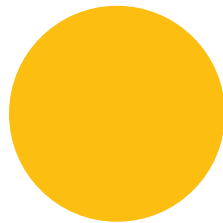
At nyMusikk I worked with Øyvind Torvund, the previous curator of the organization and a great composer. I commissioned a piece called *Sweet Pieces* (2016) for the Oslo Philharmonic, performing for the first time in Sentralen. He ended up making a piece full of love for orchestral music, bathing in romantic references to Debussy but combining it with a noise solo and a Moog synthesizer. Composers have the imagination and ability to make these connections. Either you may have sat there counting the references, or you just sit in amazement at what is going on. That was such a great moment, and one where I felt really proud that nyMusikk was making this connection. It was a musical equivalent of what I had been trying to do with various articles or festival concepts over many years.

Another example was the cellist Tanja Orning and Helga Myhr playing in a painting show that we are doing at Kunstnernes Hus right now. It was an event trying to connect one set of understandings of the world via colour, abstracted shapes, paint and light and another via an accumulation of tones, sounds and sweeps. They were deeply involved but very different practices meeting in a room.

**BF:** The liveness aspect of so much art practice has been heavily stigmatized because of the pandemic over the past three months. Is this a blip, or something that is going to change the direction of live arts?

**AHN:** I am not sure it will change the direction of

This social distancing, screen-based life has lent an awful lot more power to the performative situation, the appreciation of being one of many bodies in a room and experiencing something at the same time.



## institutions

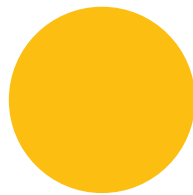
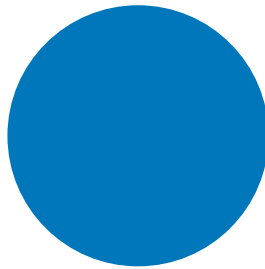
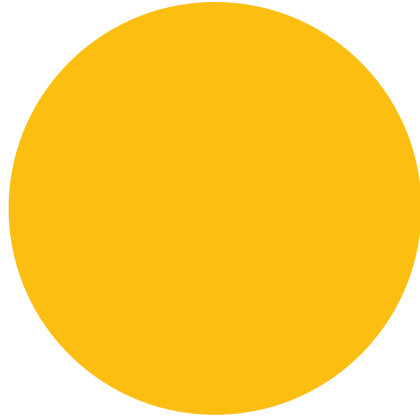
live arts, but it sure has made a very strong impact. The power of culture to bring people together and the civic mechanism of all sorts of arts institutions where people come to meet ideas—in the form of music, theatre, literature or art has been made more apparent by the pandemic. I went to my first dance performance not too long ago and it almost had me in tears, in a way that it might not have 6 months ago. This social distancing, screen-based life has lent an awful lot more power to the performative situation, the appreciation of being one of many bodies in a room and experiencing something at the same time.

We have also learned how better to digitally connect. Six months ago we would have met in a café for this conversation but now we know how easy it is to just press a button and meet somebody. I have seen so many interviews and panels online, I feel like I have really learned a lot through my screen, just because there have been a lot of interesting conversations that I would have otherwise missed or would have considered jumping on a plane for. This can be used in the future in good ways.

**BF:** Is there anything else you would like to add?

**AHN:** What is really important in curation is not just to program the people you already know, trust and have worked with before. Of course you have long relationships with some artists and you know that they will just get it, and there is no risk. You need that, but it is also important to look outside your field, dive into new places and take chances. Especially now, in light of Black Lives Matter, it is important to understand how Eurocentric this field is, how little we understand of musics in other parts of the world and how dismissive Anglo-American and European contemporary music has been to musical expression in different parts of the world, bunching it all together under the label of “world music” and meeting in places where likeminded individuals are often found, which can easily become an incredibly

insular and protective scene. As a curator you have a responsibility to give new voices a space. That was also the basis for *Her Noise*. It was like realizing that an entire continent was just missing from the map. Have wide references, a curious attitude and do not be afraid of exploring!



We have also learned how better to digitally connect. Six months ago we would have met in a café for this conversation but now we know how easy it is to just press a button and meet somebody.

# BJØRNAR HABBESTAD

interviewed by Brandon Farnsworth

## BIO

**Bjørnar Habbestad** (\*1976) is the Artistic Director of nyMusikk. He is widely experienced in the field of contemporary music, as a flutist, composer, sound artist and curator. Before he joined NyMusikk, Habbestad was a PhD fellow at The Norwegian Academy of Music, where he has researched collaborative processes between composers and performers. Musically, Habbestad's activities range from installation works to chamber music, noise, improvisation and electroacoustics. He has performed at key venues and festivals in Norway and abroad, and has done commissions for Carte Blanche, Borealis Festival and Bergen Kunsthall among others. Outside of his artistic work, Habbestad was a central part of the scene that established BEK - Bergen Center for Electronic Arts and later Lydgalleriet, where he also served as chairman and Artistic Director in 2013. He owns and runs the record label + 3DB Records.

**Brandon Farnsworth:** You took over the Artistic Directorship of NyMusikk from Anne Hilde Neset in 2017. How do you compare your approaches?

**Bjørnar Habbestad:** Both our practices connect NyMusikk to a broad spectrum of contemporary musics, something which often surprises many of our international colleagues. There is a long tradition of being 'undogmatic' and stylistically pluralistic over our history, engaging with the visual arts scene, electronic music, the jazz and free music scene, etc. We are after all a small country, so our musical communities are by extension also very small. In other words, the broadness of our collaborations and ways of working are partly by design and partly by necessity. The search for contact points between these different environments and ways of thinking with sound is really what drives my programming. From my own perspective, this spectrum also relates to my background both as a musician and as a composer. I have been performing and creating music in the fields of contemporary music, free improvisation and electroacoustic music since graduating. I like to think that this is mirrored in the programs I have been working with and how I am approaching the festival that I inherited.

**BF: What have been the main challenges?**

**BH:** My background means that I am used to being in close contact with actual artistic processes. The biggest change in taking on this new curatorial role has been to come in to a team and have a more managerial, directorial function. It has been extremely rewarding to follow artistic processes other than my own, which is a first for me in this context. From a position of such privilege, it is very easy to indulge in curatorial vanity, projecting images of oneself through the newness of others. My approach in selecting and supporting projects has therefore been to always ask myself: are my decisions reflecting my own personal taste, or ensuring that we present the best possible

version of the project at hand? If I cannot clearly be an advocate of the project myself, then I know I am headed in the wrong direction.

**BF: How does NyMusikk coordinate among its bureaus across Norway?**

**BH:** We are organized as an association (forening). We have 13 autonomous local chapters spread across the country, including in Oslo. Additionally, we have a central administrative staff of four people who produce Only Connect, our own concerts and collaborations largely in Oslo, and aid and assist the local chapters. Some of the tedious work like rights clearance lie with us, and we also support the local chapters through a central funding pool that we apply for. If your chapter has done a certain number of concerts one year, you file a report with us and get a 'refund' to support them.

The local chapters themselves are run on a volunteer basis. They are staffed by performers, composers and amateurs with a close connection to new music. That is an incredible resource and the backbone of the organization. Each local chapter has their own ideas about what is relevant and necessary and valid at any given time. It means that NyMusikk serves different purposes and subscribes to different aesthetic positions in different parts of the country, something which is clearly a strength.

**BF: If NyMusikk is a home for such a diverse spectrum of practices, how are you mediating these practices to audiences?**

**BH:** There are no quick fixes, but I strongly believe in having multiple but very open agendas. We engage with very narrow aesthetic fields, but try to do so in a very inclusive manner. In my own curation, I try to not get stuck on any one thing, be it a specific target audience, way of presenting music, or one kind of line-up. Instead, the overall strategy is to think precisely about finding contrasts and differences

Are my decisions reflecting my own personal taste, or ensuring that we present the best possible version of the project at hand?



in programming, while also communicating what is common between them. We spend a lot of time thinking about how a sound walk, for example, can be communicated as equally rewarding to visiting a concert hall. Personally, my strongest arts experiences come from being surprised, of being asked to consider something that I was not prepared for. Having to rethink if it is OK to make a certain aesthetic choice or if something has gone too far creates these grey zones that are very valuable, as they ask your audience to take a stand.

**BF:** So it is less focused on formats, and more on offering experiences.

**BH:** I do not think of NyMusikk as a concert arranger. We arrange concerts because we think the whole ecosystem around making new music and art is valuable and important, both in itself and as a part of a larger societal machinery. Our purpose is to spread knowledge, interest and experiences relating to new music, and arranging concerts is one of our tools to do so.

The first version of Only Connect that I did in 2018 was emblematic of this, thanks to the stark contrast between its two days. The first took place in Sentralen, a big, flashy, well-equipped arts space in downtown Oslo. For day two, we set up in a café two blocks down the street, but with no infrastructure, no soundproofing and our own PA. Some people were completely turned off, as this meant having the Cikada string quartet playing in a 35°C bar with all the windows open and no ventilation in a heatwave. It showed very literally the relationship between music and the economy and what could potentially happen if the cultural environment in Norway looked different 10 years from now. Twenty years ago, we were producing in these environments without any kind of infrastructure. Personally, I think Georg Friedrich Haas' music has never sounded better than in that bar, with a standing audience and the musicians sweating through it, it was magical!

**BF:** Speaking of Only Connect, your programming seemed to adapt surprisingly

### **well to becoming an online festival. How did this all come together?**

**BH:** We started getting worried in late February that our festival at the end of April was going to get upended. Like other festivals we were under pressure to cancel, but this was never really an option. Our policy became adapting to the situation, to honour all the agreements with the artists, without any strings attached, so even if we cancelled the live events we paid their fees. The money that we did not spend on travel, hotels and production was then spent on making an online festival. If the artists were interested, we told them we would be very happy to host a contribution of theirs towards this festival, but that their participation was voluntary. Absolutely all the artists contributed. We were floored by this trust.

I had conversations with all of the artists and together we developed the concepts for how they would engage with the original program. Once the direction was set, our role was very straightforward. The artists who were based in Oslo were able to borrow recording gear from us. Our video editor worked on all the contributions, and in some cases, we also assisted remotely. The general principle was that because nobody was getting paid to produce new work for this, it had to make sense in connection with the process they were already in, and had to be something which would not put them in a difficult situation. Because we did not participate in the streaming-boom, this allowed us to put more energy into getting optimal results out of each contribution through mastering, editing, graphic design, etc.

**BF:** The videos often beautifully captured these artists' processes in a way you do not often see in our field. They seemed very conceptual.

**BH:** I would not necessarily say that it was conceptual. What this festival really brought out in

my eyes was contextual awareness. We misuse the word 'conceptual' in contemporary music so much, because every time there are any considerations that are not 'purely musical,' they are coined conceptual. I find this to be too easy. The actions, choices, and formats from our online festival do not communicate verbal ideas more strongly than 'normal' music does, but its disconnection from physical and social spaces made us reflect on music's ability to engage the context of its presentation. To me, this becomes particularly clear in the absence of all the conventions of traditional concert practice.

Very early on, I saw that Only Connect 2020 was going to be a festival like we had never seen before. What surprised me when we launched the festival six weeks after our conversations with artists was the quality of each of the contributions. I knew that we had a wide variety of approaches, and that the strategies that the different artists had chosen would form very interesting perspectives on what a festival can be. But to see the dedication and the level of quality that came out of those six weeks was extremely

**The overall strategy is to think precisely about finding contrasts and differences in programming, while also communicating what is common between them.**

moving and very humbling. It was produced under very difficult circumstances for everybody, with all the artists contributing time, consideration, care and skill, making a truly unique festival.

**BF: How is this experience going to change your work going forward?**

**BH:** A festival is a tool. It is an opportunity to get work done. Engaging different artistic collectives and practices in new ways is central to this, and to my interpretation of what Only Connect should be. In my view, Anne Hilde Neset's 'connections' dealt more with connections between sound and discourse, using conceptual thinking as a starting point to make combinations of musical programs. For me, it has been much more about finding 'connections' between different practices, and staying sensitive to how we combine venues, composers and ensembles. Meeting the challenges of the pandemic has really just been a continuation of that process, which is about not taking anything for granted, and using contemporary music and this drive to create new experiences as the engine for getting new stuff done. There is an incredible, underlying desire to create and overcome difficulties in the field. I think the pandemic has shown this energy in a lot of people, which of course again is very humbling, given the economic difficulties the field now faces.

For me, these few productions that we have pulled off in between lockdowns have been very important symbols, a way to celebrate this energy. One example this past August, was an outdoor concert in the Ekeberg Park where we premiered a brass band piece by George Lewis, a work for birch trumpets by Wolfgang Plagge, and combined it with the electronic music of Ruth Anderson, which had never been played in Norway before.

The combination of birch trumpets hidden in the woods, surrounding a brass band, connected by diffused tape music from the 1970s sounds absurd.

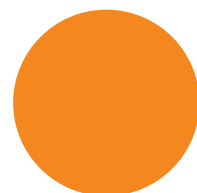
But carefully placed within the trees, the result was an incredibly intimate and focused listening experience, despite the lack of a concert hall. We worked with the environment that we had, and created a situation that tried to address the challenges and limitations of the pandemic creatively.

**BF: I find the adaptability of these musicians to new settings and formats under such difficult circumstances inspiring. Meanwhile, the much larger symphony and opera organizations insist on programming only a narrow spectrum of artists in fixed formats, though perhaps now streamed online. If with their much more significant resources they are unwilling to support the broad range of contemporary musics that NyMusikk deals with, does this create a glass ceiling for the artists you work with? Does it not give you a de facto mandate that is impossible for such a small organization to fulfill?**

**BH:** nyMusikk is a very small operation, we are four people. Still, we create a festival, run a concert series, a national network, produce videos, books, you name it. If we had the resources of such large organisations, our impact could of course be much greater. That said, I think the issue lies not in the oldness of symphony orchestras, but rather in that they are institutions and we are part of the 'free scene' of cultural agents. In Norway, funding for these two sectors has grown increasingly disproportionate over the past 15 years. It has always been a huge gap, but now it is a real and fundamental challenge to all the smaller and marginal actors. What saves us is that our organisation is set up to be small and flexible, expanding and contracting in order to adapt to the different types of projects we do. The question is whether these larger organisations are set up to support the creation of new music at all? From where I am sitting, their efforts often look sparse, uncoordinated, and random. But grief about being small is not really at the heart of my critique of symphonic orchestras. What I find disappointing is



We misuse the word 'conceptual' in contemporary music so much, because every time there are any considerations that are not 'purely musical,' they are coined conceptual.



the lack of responsibility for their own recent history and future. Why has Gruppen by Stockhausen not been performed in Norway? Why is Olga Neuwirth not invited to the opera to show Orlando? The orchestras of today know how to do these things, it is a myth that musicians cannot play contemporary music any more. I wonder if the formal structures around orchestras represent a bigger hindrance than the musicians themselves, like programmers that do not know the recent repertoire, or producers that are scared of 'unusual' things that they do not know how to incorporate into their standard production flow.

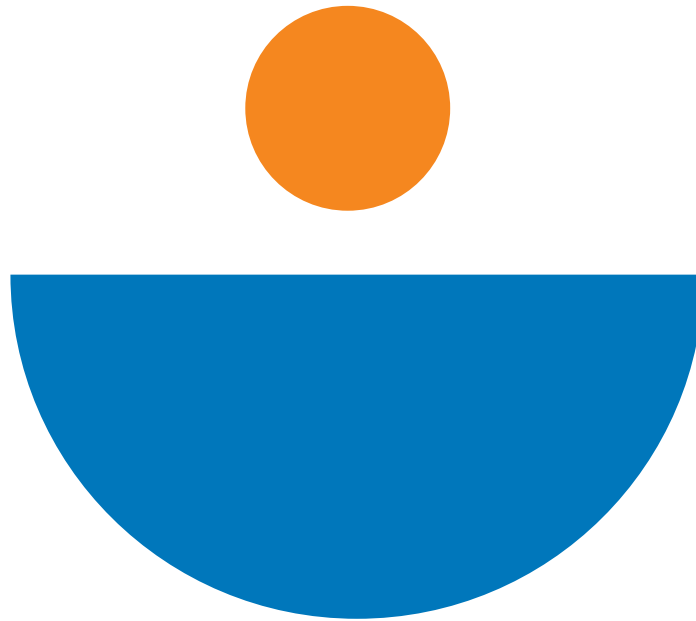
But there are very positive exceptions. Take for example the Bergen Philharmonic's Pauline Hall Prize, a composition award for female composers. Or the Stavanger Symphony Orchestra, who at Only Connect 2019 played a program of 90 minutes of new music and went home smiling, because we had a great conductor and our production team was there to make sure all the weird things worked. If orchestras are to be credible partners in the making of new music, then these kinds of events need to be integrated into their organisation.

**BF:** I am struck by the historical parallels between the situation you describe between the establishment and free scene and the tensions between established museums and emerging contemporary art practices in the 1960s. In both cases there is a major disconnect between what artists are doing and what the institutions are set up to support. This tension ultimately led in the visual arts to the birth of contemporary art museums as we know them today, begging the question as to whether the same will ultimately happen here.

**BH:** Perhaps. But the kind of institutional criticism that was emphasized in the visual arts field starting in the 1960s has been largely underdeveloped in music. The spatial pieces of that time, experimenting with

different seating of players etc., could be thought of as early attempts at this, but it seems their impact on the repertoire has been relatively modest. We see more attempts in recent years, but seldom emanating from the inside of such institutions. Whether these kinds of projects can lead to the form of redefinition and reorganisation that was seen in the visual art scene is questionable. It is surely an intriguing thought, but I am not holding my breath. However, we will continue to do what we can to move formats, conventions and potentials forward, also in the symphonic institutions.

As I said, arranging concerts, setting up festivals, to me these are tools. And for the moment, the dynamics of nyMusikk, its flexibility and adaptability, is not only a question of pragmatism. For me, it is an artistic quality in its own right.



What I find disappointing is the lack of responsibility for their own recent history and future. Why has Gruppen by Stockhausen not been performed in Norway? Why is Olga Neuwirth not invited to the opera to show Orlando?



# FREDRIK ANDERSSON

interviewed by Anna Jakobsson

## BIO

---

**Fredrik Andersson** is Program Director of Royal Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra/Stockholm Concert Hall Foundation. He has a background as a professional trombonist. Before his current position, he was the orchestra manager at The Royal Opera in Stockholm.

**Anna Jakobsson:** Can you tell the reader a bit about your organisation and the work that you do?

**Fredrik Andersson:** I am the programme director of the Stockholm Concert Hall Foundation, Konserthuset Stockholm, as we call it. The concert hall was built in 1926 for two purposes, to be the home of Royal Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra and to host the Nobel Prize Ceremony. I have a CEO above me, who is the artistic director of the hall and of the orchestra. As the programme director, I am responsible for the RSPO's repertoire as well as for programming other events in the hall. Half of the concerts are performed by RSPO, which is an ordinary symphony orchestra, and then the rest of the programmes consist of chamber music, both by the RSPO's musicians but also guesting ensembles. Every season we also do a large number of jazz concerts. We would like to do more world music while trying to stay in the arts music field, so to speak. This is what we do and have been doing in the hall for almost 100 years now.

**AJ:** Can speak a bit about what spring has been like for you in the light of the COVID-19 crisis?

**FA:** In March I was planning for spring 2022 and suddenly I had to cancel everything. I had to rebook the artists for this spring and as we decided to go digital and do live stream concerts, I had to make up brand new programmes as well because we could book people who lived in Stockholm as guest artists, and we could only use a small ensemble of musicians. Due to current governmental health restrictions, we are only allowed to use a maximum of 50 musicians from RSPO, making it more or less a chamber orchestra. It has been really chaotic. Despite this terrible situation and people dying all over the world, I must also say that it has been a good challenge for an organisation like ours. Suddenly you see that, if you are forced to, it is possible to make a U-turn with this Atlantic ship.

**AJ:** You have also been working a lot with your digital platform.

**FA:** Yes. In 2013 we started to video record our concerts. We filmed the dress rehearsal and two concerts and then we patched it and edited it into a concert movie. Suddenly there was no time for that. We have been talking about live streaming concerts for a while but now we just had to do it. We brought in a new team lead by a recording guy who has been responsible for live streaming for Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra. All the films are on our website now and you can really see development from the first film from April 8 until the last one from June 10, when it comes to camera positions and the musicians being more relaxed in front of the cameras. Since we had to follow the restrictions for social distancing, the musicians have been seated with 1,5-2 meters between them. This meant that we had to spread out over the whole stage. There were difficulties in the beginning, for example the percussionist had problems hearing the concert master and vice versa. Even though the circumstances have been extraordinarily unfortunate, it has been a fun challenge. The musicians have been urged to use their ears more and not just follow the conductor's beating. I think, in a way, it has been really progressive and developing for the musicians to adjust to a more chamber musical way of playing.

**AJ:** What have the audiences' responses been like?

**FA:** The comments on our Facebook site have been overwhelming, they really love it. As a music lover myself, I want to hear live music. When you suddenly cannot do that there is a big hole in your daily life. We have felt that people have been really thankful that we have produced these concerts. They tell us that they put on coffee or pour a glass of wine and then sit in front of their computers and listen. Even though we are a Stockholm based orchestra and our priorities are the people in and around Stockholm, we have had viewers from all over the world that have discovered us and which is fantastic too, of course.

Suddenly you  
see that, if you  
are forced to, it is  
possible to make  
a U-turn with this  
Atlantic ship.

**AJ: The past decade the Swedish government has put pressure on the state funded orchestral institutions in order to increase the gender equality in music. You have gotten a lot of positive attention, also internationally, for your work with the orchestral repertoire as well as in your organisation. How do you work with gender balance?**

**FA:** I started as programme director in the spring of 2015 and our CEO immediately said “let’s do something about this issue now”. For quite some time, there had been a lot of discussion and talking about gender equality in classical music but nothing was really happening. I was new at work and I found it really easy to dig into the historical repertoire. There are many well-known female contemporary composers but historic music has been neglected for a very long time. Our chief conductor Sakari Oramo is very open-minded and came up with several suggestions of works by female composers. The tricky part was to convince the international guest artists. So I started to ask all guests, no matter if it was a conductor, a soloist or a string quartet, if there was any piece by a female composer that they would like to present to the Stockholm audience. At first people were hesitant but now, five years later, everyone knows that they will get this question. I do not even

have to ask, they already have suggestions of their own. We also encouraged our own musicians, who also work in chamber constellations, to go over the historical repertoire and see if they could find any hidden gems. Step by step we have taken it further and today I would say this is no issue for us. It is normal and natural that we always strive for a minimum of one piece by a female composer in all programmes.

Sometimes we fail and sometimes we have another, particular programme idea. We have also been criticised because the pieces by female composers tend to be shorter compared to the big symphonies after the interval. But to be fair, if you look at the history, you see that composers like Fanny Mendelssohn, Clara Schumann and Alma Mahler did not compose long symphonies because they were not allowed to. There are some overtures by Fanny Mendelssohn, a couple of symphonies by Amy Beach and Dora Pejačević and three symphonies by Louise Farrenc but it is rare. We have tried to highlight as many female composers as possible. Even though we only perform a short piece, we have at least introduced a new name to our audience.

**AJ: Do you have any other examples of structural changes, besides this shift in the repertoire?**

**FA:** If you want to implement gender equality thinking in an organisation as a whole, you really have to do it thoroughly. We want it to reflect all the work that we do. It could be about promotional pictures, texts in the booklets for the concerts, as well as about gender equal toilets for the audience. It must be so annoying to be a woman seeing lots of free toilets for men but, as a woman, having to cue for the whole interval. We have tried to change small things like this, so that you really can feel that this a gender equal concert hall, orchestra, organisation, that you come to.

**AJ: How do you work to support the development of contemporary music?**

**FA:** We mainly make commissions from Swedish composers. It is necessary for Swedish musical life that we present new Swedish music. Even though we are a united organisation, we only commission pieces for RSPO. We try to commission every second new work by a male composer and every second new work by a female composer. If you look at the statistics of the composers connected to the Swedish Composers' Union, there are about 20% female composers and 80% male composers. So, it gets a little bit unequal for the male composers if you commission 50% of the works by female composers but to create a change, I think it is important that we do it. We will probably keep working like this for a few years' time, before it evens out.

We also have the annual international composer's festival where we highlight one international composer. Even here we try, at least every second year, to have a female composer. We had Thea Musgrave in 2018 and in September we were supposed to present Olga Neuwirth. As we want to have a full audience for the international composer's festival, we have decided to postpone it to next year. Every year we also have our Composer's Weekend, where we present a Swedish composer who is in the midst of their careers, often in their 40s or 50s. For international composers, we often present slightly older persons who have an extensive career behind them and a long list of work to choose from.

**AJ: Who makes the decisions when it comes to the programming?**

**FA:** For the orchestra programming we have a programme committee as we call it and there are about eight musicians from RSPO, then it is me, our CEO, our orchestra manager and our editor/publisher, who writes all the texts and the programme comments for the booklets. We are a group of about

twelve people who meet every month. The musicians rotate every year, so it is mainly people who are really interested in the repertoire and what we are doing with RSPO that volunteers for it.

**AJ: There is this prejudice that classically trained musicians are not so keen on performing new music. Is this true for your orchestra?**

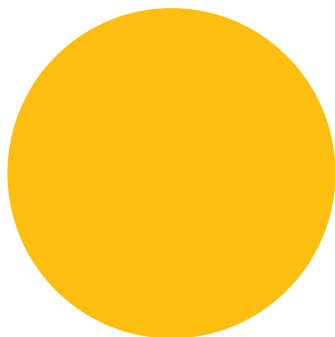
**FA:** I used to be a musician myself and I have passed the 50 year line. When I played in orchestras, many years ago, there was more resistance to contemporary music than there is now. In general the musicians are really supportive of contemporary composers. In addition to their main jobs in RSPO, many of them also work in smaller groups and often in collaboration with composers. Although most of them love to play Mozart and Mahler and Shostakovich, they also love to play a really good contemporary piece. I think we have a strong, positive way of looking when it comes to contemporary music. We have wonderful musicians who come up with the most brilliant ideas. As the programme director, it is my job to choose from all of these ideas and create a good variety, spread over the season.

**AJ: What are you trying to avoid in your programming?**

**FA:** Since we are an acoustic orchestra in an acoustic hall it is not optimal for us to do electroacoustic music. This means that composers who are in the electroacoustic field get quite neglected by our institution. We try to make up for this in different ways. One example of this is the subscription series, New Friday, that we started a couple years ago, with concerts in our chamber hall, the extremely beautiful Grünewaldsalen. There we present music by freelancing groups who come in and curate their own evening. We start with opening the bar, which is located inside the hall, followed by a 60-minute programme. In this format we can experiment with



We have tried to highlight as many female composers as possible. Even though we only perform a short piece, we have at least introduced a new name to our audience.



video and electroacoustic music. The rules for the programmes are that the music has to be written in this century, so it cannot be older than before 2000.

**AJ: How do you vision for the future? What will you play in 50 years, say?**

**FA:** I am planning for August now... *(laughter)*. I mean, it really depends. I think that the situation that we are in now could really alter the whole society, if it continues. If they find a vaccine soon my guess is that we will go back to the old normal, how it was before. But if they do not find it and we have to keep living like this with social distancing and not many people gathering at the same time, then it is not only the music business but society as a whole that will be forced to take a new direction. Perhaps this will prompt orchestras, concert organisations and promoters be more creative and daring in finding new ways of presenting music. But 50 years ahead, I do not know. The biggest fear is that we continue the same way as we always have *(laughter)*.

**AJ: What are you taking away from the current crisis?**

**FA:** The digital is definitely here to stay. If we take our concert hall as an example, a lot of people have discovered that there is a lot of good things going on here. I really hope and think that we will continue with this digital concert platform that we are building at the moment.

**AJ: In Sweden, as in the rest of Europe, there has been a big increase of outreach programmes, such as concerts in elderly homes.**

**FA:** We have done one of these concerts with a smaller group of the orchestra but I know that there are many other orchestras that have done a lot of this during these past months. I understand that it has been hugely appreciated. It is a quite easy thing to

do, to send 4-6 musicians to an elderly home to play for 40 minutes, and it creates so much joy for the people who live there. There will probably also be a shift as well, I hope so.

**AJ: I mean if you can take a whole symphony orchestra to Tokyo it seems pretty easy in comparison.**

**FA:** *(Laughter)* No, no, no, it is much easier to go to the elderly home next door, obviously.

**AJ: What are your upcoming plans for RSPO?**

**FA:** We plan for a series of live stream concerts in August. If we are allowed to take 50 people in to the hall, we will do so. If not, we will keep to live streaming exclusively. When the regular season starts in September, we hope that they will have lifted the restrictions so that we will be allowed to take 500 people into the concert hall. We will try to keep to the original programming but of course we do not know to what extent this is possible. I am already going over the repertoire in case we need to maintain social distancing. I really, really hope that we can start bringing audiences into the hall soon, so that people can enjoy music live. For every musician and artist that is what feeds you, so to speak, the communication and to share the music together with the audience.

The biggest fear is  
that we continue the  
same way as we  
always have.



# INTERVENTION

by Jennifer Torrence

**From:** Jennifer Torrence  
**Date:** Saturday, 1 August 2020 at 10:44  
**To:** Farnsworth Brandon  
**Subject:** Intervention

Hey,

My thought about the intervention is simply to republish two lists, two calls to action - one by Pauline Oliveros from Breaking the Silence (on women in music) from Sounding the Margins, and one by Anthony R. Green from this article, which calls for a similar set of actions but from the perspective of Black composers: <https://nmbx.newmusicusa.org/what-the-optics-of-new-music-say-to-black-composers/>

After sitting on this, this is really all I feel like doing. I have nothing more important to add. My hope is that these calls to action might also serve as models for other initiatives regarding BIPoC/BAME, LGBTQI+ artists. If this sounds ok I wonder about copyright and further and I wonder about giving payment to Anthony and the foundation Pauline mentions in her list, <http://iawm.org/>.

For me, this would not need to be designed anymore than printing the two texts. It is up to you what you think of this and what would be best visually for the publication.

I don't see myself as an author but rather someone who is curating two calls to action. At the moment I don't see that I need to be mentioned at all.

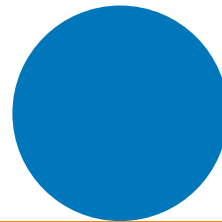
Sorry for my slowness on the notes from the interview, they are coming, I just wanted to get my head around the intervention a little more.

Looking forward to your thoughts,

Thanks!  
jen



# PAULINE OLIVEROS



---

© Pauline Oliveros, "Breaking the Silence," in *Sounding the Margins: Collected Writings 1992-2009*, edited by Lawton Hall (Kingston: Deep Listening Publications, 2010), 16-21  
Courtesy of The Pauline Oliveros Trust and PoPandMoM.org

## institutions

Recommendations for how you can help to break the silence and change the paradigm of exclusiveness in music:

If you are a performer, always play music by women on your programs as well as music by men. Make your repertoire list available to others and teach your students to play music by women. Complain if contest repertoire does not include music written by women.

If you are a private music teacher, be sure that you have teaching materials written by women. The collective power of private teachers is enormous.

If you are a professor, include women composers in your research and request your libraries to order publications of music by women. Include women's works in your theoretical analyses and writings.

If you are a journalist, write about the music of women. Keep a list of women who create music in your community or city. Find a way to publish the list or put it on the internet and link it to other such sites.

If you are a musicologist, rewrite music history to include women. Devote your research to women in music.

If you are an interested listener, by all means listen to music by women. Write letters to the musical organizations that you patronize requesting that they commission and perform music by women.

If you are a patron, commission works by women.

If you are a composer, give priority to community building over career building. Find ways to collaborate, serve the field and make it good for your colleagues as well as yourself. Are you listening to your own inner voice and answering it's call? Are you expressing what you need to express or what you have been taught to express by the canon of men's musical establishment? Of what value is the technique and form you have learned to the expression of what you feel and hear as your own voice in music? How would you like for your music to function in your community? In the world?

All could join the International Alliance for Women in Music to receive current information on all aspects of women in relationship with music, news of performances, composition and musicology, and for participation in initiatives to promote more performances and creation of music by women. <http://www.iawm.org/>

# ANTHONY R. GREEN



---

This article excerpt originally appeared in NewMusicBox, the web magazine from New Music USA and is reprinted with permission: <https://nmbx.newmusicusa.org/what-the-optics-of-new-music-say-to-black-composers/>.

## institutions

If you are an active soloist or are in or run an ensemble of any size, program music by black composers. Program all of it, not just the “socially aware” music. Program it as part of events that happen in months other than February or March. Arrange portrait concerts. Arrange a non-“social justice”-themed concert and program works by black composers which fit this theme, and don’t make a big deal about the identity of the composers. After performing these works once, perform them again, and again, and again, for many years. Make them regular works on concerts. Give them to your students to study.

If you do not know any music by a black composer, create a playlist and have weekly listening sessions. Listen often. Listen to music that you do not like. Find music that you like and love. Engage with it critically, but respectfully. Mention black composers in conversations; when you are talking about how cool Gunther Schuller was, don’t forget Ed Bland or Julia Perry. When you are talking about how cool Chaya Czernowin is, don’t forget Tania León and Marcos Balter.

Share what you know and what you have learned about black composers. Outside of sharing this information with students and in conversations, write blog posts. Write articles. Make vlog posts and podcasts. Make memes and post them on your social media channels. Share stories and information and anecdotes on social media and other platforms. Share YouTube and Vimeo videos of performances and interviews. Hold listening parties. Spread the word about helpful resources, ensembles, organizations, and other entities doing such work in a powerful, significant way. Encourage people in your community to engage with this work, and be curious.

Demand more from your musical sources. Write to your radio stations, to your favorite YouTube channels, to your favorite ensembles; ask your teachers to include more music by black composers in the theory classroom, in the history classroom, in your private lessons. Those who have power will not know what the demand is until the demand is made. If there is really a demand, then make it known.

Support black composers and the soloists, organizations, and ensembles that program their music. Castle of our Skins (of which I am a co-founder) is one of a handful of organizations whose seasonal programming regularly consists of at least 90% music by black composers (as attested by its repertoire list), and it is, contrary to popular business-model or donor-related expectations in music, a successful organization. If you are in a position to commission or create an opportunity for a composer for a project, consider reaching out to a black composer, then work with that composer, support that composer financially, professionally, and emotionally. Do not give up on that composer, because perhaps that composer already feels abandoned by the new music and classical music communities.

When a black composer is expressing a grievance, listen with all you have. While conversations about black underrepresentation in classical music are generally positive and well-meant, such conversations are almost pointless if they do not include the voices of black people. Trust these voices. Be critical, but respectful. Engage in exchange. Be patient. We want to talk, but “it’s a privilege to be able to critique without professional fears.”<sup>1</sup> At one point in my life, I did not have this privilege. Perhaps I still do not have it. But when our work is blatantly ignored, disrespected, not studied, and not programmed, our voice is all we have.

---

1. My first encounter with this phrase was in the article: “Classical music’s white male supremacy is overt, pervasive, and a problem,” by Daniel Johanson, for *Scapi Magazine*, February 18, 2018. This article has since been removed from *Scapi*, but appears on other websites in various formats.

# KASPER HOLTEN

interviewed by Anna Jakobsson

## BIO

---

**Kasper Holten** (\*1973, Copenhagen) has been CEO for The Danish Royal Theatre since September 2018, and is an autodidact stage director. Holten has directed more than 75 operas, plays, musicals and operettas. His productions have been staged in Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Iceland, Finland, Latvia, Germany, UK, Spain, Italy, France, Austria, Russia, Argentina, Australia, USA and Japan, including at world leading companies such as The Royal Opera Covent Garden, Vienna State Opera, Deutsche Oper Berlin and Teatro alla Scala in Milan. He was appointed artistic director of the Royal Danish Opera in Copenhagen at age 26, and successfully oversaw the company moving into a new grand opera house in Copenhagen. From 2011-2017 he was Director of Opera at Royal Opera House Covent Garden in London.

Holten has previously been a member of The Danish Music Council, The Radio and Television Board and vice chairman of Opera Europe. In 2006, he was appointed adjunct professor at Copenhagen Business School.

**Anna Jakobsson:** Can you talk about the structure of your organisation and the work that you do?

**Kasper Holten:** The Royal National Theatre is the national home in Denmark for drama, opera and ballet and of course also symphonic music. The theatre is 275 years old as an organisation. We are one of the few theatres in Europe on this level who still has all three art forms combined in one organisation. The board is largely politically appointed and we work within four years' agreements with our government. The board then employs a CEO, that would be me, the three artistic directors; the director of opera, the director of drama and the director of ballet, who are in charge of the programming. The theatre has three houses, the opera house built in 2005, the old stage from 1874, where the ballet now largely resides, and the drama house from 2008 which has three stages. Our yearly turnover is 800 million DKK a year, roughly speaking, of which approximately 570 million are public support. We have a box office income of approximately 140 million, some commercial income, and about 50 million in donations and sponsorships. Every season we have about 500 000 people in the audiences of our own productions.

**AJ:** This spring has been challenging for the arts industry as a whole, what has it been like for you?

**KH:** Firstly, one has to say that this is health crisis and that there are people that suffer much more than we do. Having said that, of course it is a tricky time for any theatre in the world. Theatre is the opposite of Corona, it is about coming together, it is about live performance, it is about being close to other people, it is about using your senses in a physical way, so of course it is difficult.

We managed to come up with a digital solution which was established quite quickly, mainly consisting of archive material. We are different to the Swedish

institutions in more than being closed as a theatre, we have also been closed as a work place. This meant that we have not even been able to record new performances with our artists, so of course it has been limited of what we could do in terms of fresh material.

The theatre was shut down from the 12th of March until the 7th of June, when we reopened with a summer concert. We had to cancel several shows including a huge outdoor production of *The Hobbit*, which has been postponed till next summer. We are lucky that we have our state subsidy and are not threatened on our immediate survival, but it is also clear that we are losing something close to 10% of our normal turnover in one go. At the moment, we are waiting for the government to decide about help packages for the governmental institutions.

**AJ:** In your last annual report, which was released in the light of Corona you said, "Status quo is not an option for us. A modern cultural institution creates its own relevance". Can you expand on what you meant by that?

**KH:** If you look back just a generation or two ago, institutions like the Royal Danish Theatre had an almost automatic legitimacy in that it was a part of the governmental education system, it would be expected that it would be a royal theatre. Although our work would be under discussion our purpose for existing would not be discussed. With the democratisation of culture this is no longer a given. It is not enough to consider your accessibility, you must also consider your relevance. The challenge is to balance your artistic integrity with also wanting to be relevant to as many people as possible. One is a political agenda and the other artistic. How do you marry the two?

My answer, put very briefly, is that you must insist on a high level of artistic integrity in individual projects but when you consider your mix of repertoire across the season you need to look at whether you have a diverse enough offering that speaks to more people.

This season we were supposed to perform David Bowie's musical *Lazarus* and we could see men in their 50s buying theatre tickets because they relate to that music. It could also be about having different voices and backgrounds in narratives or on stage, or to consider if, for example, humour is part of our offering. I think that where you go wrong is if you start to put humour into every single project.

**AJ: The debate as to whether you should give people what they want or you should educate them is an old one. How do you position yourself in relation to this when it comes to repertoire and risk taking?**

**KH:** I call this the public service dilemma, and we know the same dilemma from the broadcasters. You are receiving a lot of state subsidy so, in other words, you must produce something that appeals to everyone. On the other hand, if you do that, you are doing something that commercial theatres or commercial broadcasters might do as well and then why should you get state subsidy? So it is, in a way, a case of damned if you do and damned if you do not. Our subsidy has shrunk about 17% since 2008, which means we have 100 million DKK less every season than we had when we opened the new opera house and new drama house. This of course can be felt and does, of course, sadly, impact on our ability to take risks. My job is to protect individual projects with a high-risk profile but also to ensure that the total risk profile is balanced against financial reality.

I think it is important to not end up in the position where you are either a victim and very vulnerable, or where you say, "we just do our art and we do not give a damn whether anyone likes us". For me there is a third position which is more interesting - which is to say that in a time when everyone is feeling digitally restless and we have everything available at our fingertips, I think that there will be a growing need for live experiences and for presenting work in depth. The culture business has always had a tendency to

talk about ourselves as victims. To say that things were more fun ten years ago is all too easy. It is also lazy and nobody gives a damn. So, to try to remain optimistic and say "there is a lot going for us, there is a market for us in the future", is the kind of role that we need to take mentally. We have to escape the role of the victim in the cultural world. It is becoming really uninteresting and actually kind of unsympathetic.

**AJ: You used to be the head of the Royal Opera in London. What different approaches are there in the UK and in Scandinavia in terms of diversity?**

**KH:** The sensitivity is greater in the UK because they have a different history and they have been forced to deal with discussions that we are only just starting to grasp the consequences of here in Scandinavia. I arrived in London as a somewhat blue-eyed Scandinavian, thinking that racism was not really an issue. Obviously I did not, and do not, consider myself a racist but I was not really aware of the structural bias and all these things that we are slowly beginning to understand exist and that we are part of as well. My time in London moved me to see that I have an

We have to escape  
the role of the victim  
in the cultural world.  
It is becoming really  
uninteresting and actually  
kind of unsympathetic.

## institutions

active responsibility, not just in terms of racism but also in terms of equality - female conductors for example, in how we can promote more talent to our stages, which is important.

Sadly, I think that a lot of these discussions in the UK come from a negative starting point. The whole audience outreach, which they are really good at in the UK, was triggered by the Thatcher years with big cuts to arts funding which provoked some of the difficult discussions that we are now starting to see across Europe. In a way, there is a risk in that the UK discussion has been more polarising. The arts institutions are still to a large extent funded by white families. There can be a very delicate balance for the institutions, wanting to promote diversity but working within a framework where they are relying on raising money from very wealthy individuals who might not share their opinion.

I hope that in Scandinavia we can be ahead of that game. Not being pushed into it but rather trying to form our own opinion on what our role in society should be like. Not just when it comes to racism but also in relation to diversity understood in the broadest possible sense, both in the work place and as a cultural institution. I think that there is a somewhat disappointing outcome in the UK. There has been a lot of talk about diversity but when you look at the actual results they have not managed as much progress as they should have. I would hope that we can take a different approach. We do not need to talk as much about it publicly, we will just simply try to embrace the changes. That is obviously easier said than done.

**AJ: Why is there is little contemporary music in your repertoire? What should contemporary music do to get onto your stages?**

**KH:** If you look at our 2019/2020 season, of which sadly almost a third was cancelled, two out of ten main stage operas were written by living composers. *The Handmaid's Tale* by Poul Ruders, which was

written 20 years ago, and the world premiere of Hans Abrahamsen's *The Snow Queen*. That is 20% of the main stage titles written by living composers. I would not call that little. I actually think it is an unrealistically high level compared to many other opera houses in Europe.

We have an opera director who is very keen on contemporary music but he is also working with the reality of having to deliver a repertoire within some pretty tight financial constraints. If I could phrase the dilemma: If he wants to do a lot of contemporary music, he needs to do a hell of a lot of *La traviata*s in order to meet the targets. Sadly, that creates problems for the whole middle ground. What suffers is not the *La traviata*s or the brand-new music, what suffers are pieces by Janáček and Szymanowski, or other unknown operatic jewels written by composers that are not performed as often.

I would like nothing more than if we could play more contemporary opera. In London I introduced the idea that we would premiere a main stage new opera every season. They have abandoned that strategy after I left because financially it is very risky. I know that many people say that you can be successful with new opera but if you really look at the numbers it is because you do fewer shows or the price is lower. I do my best to promote the idea of being able to programme more but in the totality of the repertoire it is a question of balancing the finance and the risk profile, to be honest.

**AJ: As the national scene you also have a responsibility to ensure the next generation of contemporary opera. In regards to that, how do you think about the future in terms of the repertoire? What do you imagine that you will perform in 50 years from now?**

**KH:** That is a very good question. I think I have kind of a Jekyll and Hyde approach to this. There is the idealist in me who believes that, in this time of

algorithms controlling our cultural consumption, we will be keener to look for different art experiences. The pragmatist in me, on the other hand, having worked with management in the cultural business for the better part of twenty years, sadly sees that curiosity is under pressure. No matter what you do, there is a strong political and financial need to reach out to more people. In spite of our best intentions with new opera most people go for the classics. The realist in me sees a direction where the list of safe operas is diminishing. 15-20 years ago you could say that 50 operas were the canon but we are getting to a point where maybe only ten operas can really be called the operatic canon, similar to what we know in ballet with *Swan Lake*, *The Nutcracker* and *Sleeping Beauty* and that is about it. In my experience, it is not even a question of a star singer, the poster, or what the production is like. If you look at the individual audience members it could be important to them but if you look at the big numbers most people go for the famous titles, *La traviata*, *Carmen*, *Madame Butterfly*, simply because they sound familiar.

**AJ:** When you do make opera commissions then, what do you prioritise and what are you trying to avoid?

**KH:** In my past what has been most important is that there must be a strong artistic idea for the project. There must be a reason why you commission it. If you try to check the boxes, or create a project that is supposed to fit the targets, it always fails. You must find someone that you trust as an artist and then set him or her free.

I have become more aware of the dilemma of commissions, as to whether you should help the composer or not. Most composers will not have the chance to write thirty operas. There is a steep learning curve and they need help to not make the same mistakes other people have made in the past. The most obvious example is how difficult it is to end your piece. I mean, how many new operas have you

seen that were a bit too long and how many have you seen that were a bit too short? On the other hand, if some clever dramaturge had helped Verdi fix *La traviata*, or helped Bizet make *Carmen* feel safe, we would have never had these pieces. There is an eternal dilemma between allowing composers to pursue a vision and go down the wrong route and the pressure in this time and age to deliver success.

When you commission an opera you need to be really clear in your mind what the risk profile of the project is. In the long run you also need to remind yourself that not taking a risk is also a risk because, frankly, you are dependent on the quality of the talent. From a short-term perspective it might feel safe to make a program that consists of only *La traviatas* from wall to wall but then the exciting conductors, directors and singers will not want to come here because it will be considered too safe. Ultimately, you might actually end up being unsafe because your talents leave you. There are many opposing concerns in this question.

**AJ:** What structural changes have to be made in order for a cultural institution such as the Royal Danish Theatre to live on in its current form?

**KH:** It has been kind of fashionable lately, at least in Denmark, to say that nothing is ever going to be the same again and that this is our chance to develop everything and those who do not embrace this are dinosaurs. I am a little bit boring in that I think there is actually going to be a big demand for what do. Corona has reminded us of the value of live performance and not to take it for granted. To a large extent we have learnt how we can reach people digitally, not to replace our physical offering in the long-term but to supplement it, or to open the world of our theatre to more people.

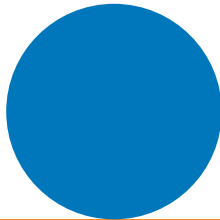
There might be some financial losses that we have to deal with and, if this draws out, of course this could be very painful. However I think that we are well

prepared for the future. It is not Corona that makes us need to question ourselves, we always have to question ourselves. I think the big risk is if you now start to do a lot of changes because it is fancy. You forget that the real change is you working with your organisation long term, always embracing change at your own speed, with your own confidence for the future. In the end I am pretty convinced that an organisation like ours is going to come out of this stronger.

**AJ:** What challenges are you facing for the future when it comes to diversity?

**KH:** The challenges for an institution like the Royal Danish Theatre are big. We are so reliant on a tradition, on our institutionalised ensembles, our orchestra, our chorus, our ballet company, that it is really difficult to embrace change. We are largely dependant on a repertoire, a canon written by white males, which presents a very narrow view of the world and often contains racism and misogyny, and it is a real challenge for us to stay relevant. Again, I think we have to be very careful not to jump on quick changes but instead embrace change on a deep level with real responsibility, almost making a virtue out of not being the ones who change fastest. It is a big challenge, I will admit, but I think we can do it.

It is not Corona that makes us need to question ourselves, we always have to question ourselves. I think the big risk is if you now start to do a lot of changes because it is fancy.





# HELENA WESSMAN

interviewed by Anna Jakobsson

## BIO

---

**Helena Wessman** is the Vice-Chancellor of the Royal College of Music in Stockholm (KMH) since 2019. Wessman has a background as a professional trombonist. She is an experienced music administrator, and was previously the General Manager for Berwaldhallen in Stockholm.

**Anna Jakobsson:** Can you briefly talk about the structure of your organization, its different academies, and the work that you do?

**Helena Wessman:** The Royal College of Music (KMH) is a freestanding college. We have approximately 200 employees, of which of 150 hold teaching positions. It varies a bit, since some people are very specialized and do not do very many hours. There are about 1300 students that enrol for our courses, and of them between 600 to 700 are enrolled in degree programs. The college is organised in three academies: One academy for jazz music, folk music and music and media production, one for music education and one for classical music, composition, conducting and music theory. They are all about the same size and have their own heads of departments, the deans. I started my position as Vice-Chancellor last year, so I have just finished my first academic year.

**AJ:** Before this job you worked as the head of the concert hall Berwaldhallen for 5 years. You were also a professional trombonist for a long time and yourself trained at the KMH. From your experience across these many roles, what are some of the biggest challenges that the classical music of Sweden is facing today?

**HW:** The biggest challenge is that we have two groups in society. We have one group of very committed audiences and performers, who go to concerts all the time and are deeply engaged, part of musical associations, etc. On the other hand, we have all those people who do not know anything or very little about classical music. The problem is that the gap is widening. It is a dangerous development, because if we are not careful, it might take us back to the olden days when people inherited their professions. We have to fight for music education in primary schools, it is essential. If we introduce classical music to children,

we can train them to become audiences or at least to accept this quite expensive art form. This can upset people outside the music scene, because they think we are so high profile and arrogant. We have a lot of work to do in this area. We have to reach out to a broader variety of people and lower the thresholds for taking part of the classical musical world. In the meantime, we need to keep our profile and be proud about it.

**AJ:** In what ways are you working with these challenges?

**HW:** Personally, I am engaged in El Sistema, which is a part of the municipality music schools. It is an outreach program which targets children in socioeconomically vulnerable areas where it is harder to reach out with classical music training. I am also engaged in a lot of discussions about music in primary school, as well as trying to push for it politically. I think that if we lose contact with classical music, it is not primarily about the music in itself, but about cutting off the roots of the music. It is all mixing again of course—but what we initially called Western pop music or jazz and so on, all has its roots in classical music. People have developed it for 2000 years. It is a treasure; we have to be careful not to lose it.

It is very important that everyone in society have access to classical music. I am not saying that everyone needs to like it, but if you are interested, you should feel that it is accessible to you. That is really a challenge because we have all these ceremonies around the music and concerts that could scare people off. We should really try to let everyone have access by getting the basic information about it in school, just as it should provide you with basic information about other important aspects of society. The school should help you to form your life through providing you with plenty of options to choose from.

It is very important that everyone in society have access to classical music. I am not saying that everyone needs to like it, but if you are interested, you should feel that it is accessible to you.

**AJ: How do you work with these issues within the frame of KMH?**

**HW:** We have recently been working on a strategic plan for the next 6 years. One of the central questions is how we can strengthen society through music, as well as how we can strengthen music's position within the society. An essential part of this is our teachers' training. It is very important that they are highly skilled, go out with confidence and really feel independent as people and as musicians. We also talk a lot about how to educate musicians, and that we really have to provide them with tools for working as freelancers. My vision is that students should be outspoken and take part in the public debates in Sweden. In the contemporary arts, they are more outspoken and more theoretical about what they do. In the musical field, many musicians just play and are not strengthened in their positions as artists and intellectuals. We try to change this through a stronger emphasis on the academic aspect of education. If you look at the cultural history this is not new, musical and intellectual development has often been closely intertwined.

**AJ: When you started at KMH in the early 1980s I guess that nobody wanted you to write academic essays. It was just about how well you played. Can you say something about the shift within Swedish higher music education in recent years?**

**HW:** I am really convinced of the importance of academic writing. Being a musician also means constantly questioning your musicianship, too. That is how you develop. We really need to see how to pair this critical mindset with a strong confidence in one's self, and the importance of music in society. Most of our students will be freelancers, and you have to be trained to reflect on your practice, like when you have to write applications for grants. With academic writing, you are also trained for analysis. That is also what society needs from musicians: to develop their analytical tools in order to be able to contextualise what they do within the frame of the wider society. I think a big problem is the lack of confidence within the music scene. How could it be, in a society where almost everyone listens to music for hours each day, there is so little public funding compared to funding in sports and so on? One key thing is to strengthen musicians' confidence so that they feel that what they do actually has value. If you are a plumber, for example, you would take for granted that you would get properly paid counted on the hours you work. We should really train musicians to think in the same way. Every musician must be a little bit harder on that to make the world know that what they do is important. We wrote in the strategic goals that former students' independence is an indicator of our success. If all students become personally and intellectually independent, then we have succeeded, we have trained them to be strong individuals.

**AJ: KMH has been criticized for its colleges being too divided, with not enough exchange and collaboration happening between its different departments. How are you working to create more synergies between academics?**

**HW:** This is something else we have discussed as part of our strategic goals. It really comes down to building a shared vision for the college. I am not saying that everyone should do exactly the same thing in the same way, but we should have the same goals. We should all work to have a close synergy between practical education and academic research. It should be very closely connected. Of course this is also challenging, especially for teachers on the practical side of music education. The performing arts field has been the subject of systematic cuts for many years and, of course, there is some suspicion toward the academic side of it. This is understandable, but I think it is time to shift the focus see how theory and practice can best benefit from each other. Both sides are equally important. That is why it is so important to have open discussions, because we have to approach these matters together. Our goal is that, within six years, you should really see close synergies between the professional, educational and academic sides of the institution. We will find exceptional new ways, I think, by having these discussions and working towards a shared goal for an extensive period of time. The competence within our organisation is really limitless!

**AJ: How do you prioritize financially in order to give your students all of these skills? What is the most important for you in education?**

**HW:** If I compare the teacher-led time when I was a student at the KMH with how it is now, I would say the hours have halved. We are under a different financial pressure. You have to choose between the amount of time that students get with teachers, their salary levels, the possibility of doing special projects within the programs and so on. We have a new campus, which is expensive. I am convinced that it was important to build it, but we have to be careful that it does not eat too much money. It is always difficult to bear all different perspectives in mind when you handle the finances, which is also a big challenge for arts institutions generally. I attribute this to us all

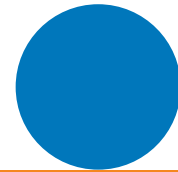
being artists and wanting to create new things. We talked a lot about this as part of our strategic work and agreed that we have to think carefully when we get new ideas because we cannot go through with everything. I look forward to speaking with the teachers on how we can increase the time spent with students by thinking in new ways. I think that we have learned a lot in the last term, with most education taking place online due to the pandemic.

**AJ: I guess there are many different opinions on what to prioritise within the conservatoire. Is there anything that you can share from your internal discussions?**

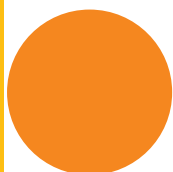
**HW:** We have recently changed our model for how money is allocated to the different academies. While it has not been distributed yet, the idea is for this new model to be more transparent and it will allow processes within the academies with the teachers about how to use the available resources in the best possible way. I am looking forward to open-minded discussions about these resources: for instance, are their priorities in line with how much money each academy has? I think that today's division is fair, but there might be some suspicions from people thinking that they get less than others. I am open to being criticized and keen on the discussions being held on the basis of everyone having the same amount of information, so that everyone has access to the actual numbers.

**AJ: Can you talk about a little bit about the admission process? Do you have any policies in place regarding representation of women or minority groups?**

**HW:** If we start with the juries, we have policies for a gender equal representation. It is not easy because in some programs the majority of teachers are male or vice versa, but we do really strive for gender equality. I am afraid that we do not have policies for the representation of minority groups, this is something



In the contemporary arts, they are more outspoken and more theoretical about what they do. In the musical field, many musicians just play and are not strengthened in their positions as artists and intellectuals.



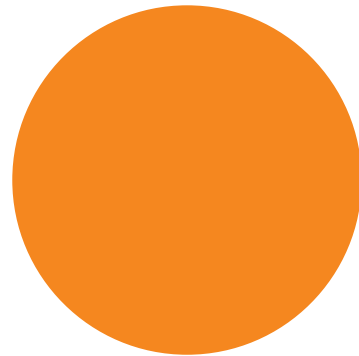
that we have left to do. That is why I am so engaged in El Sistema, because you really have to reach out to young kids from all parts of society. We do surveys with the students who are enrolling, and most of them have studied music for at least 10 years before entering. We also ask new students where they went to upper secondary school and if their parents are working with music professionally. The surveys clearly show that we have to start with the small children in order to create change. We, as KMH, need to take active responsibility to encourage that development. We have ongoing discussions about the admissions processes: Are we testing the right things? Are there things that we can do differently in order to reach out to a broader variety in applicants? Every year we also collect a lot of data based on the applications. We have to report to the government a lot about how many students are applying and for our own statistics, how many that actually come to auditions, statistics on their gender and age.

**AJ: It is commonly held that the average age of classical music audiences is aging, something that has probably accelerated with the pandemic. How should conservatoires adapt and prepare for such fundamental changes? How can we reform musical education or the classical music world?**

**HW:** I think the most important thing is that our students have the confidence to do their thing. We have discussed this issue. We discussed aging audiences in the 1980s, too. Now we know that people start to listen to classical music at the age of 35 or 40, if you have not grown up with it. We should also discuss and take perspectives from the fact that our audience is quite old. It is also because people stay for so long. We have subscribers in classical music that have been there every week for 40 or 50 years, which is amazing. Of course, we also have to do things to reach out to young people. I can see that young musicians are doing a lot of that. I think the most important thing for us is to create space for

this creativity, confidence and the training to manage projects as well as for entrepreneurship, so you can really make your ideas happen.

We should also provide a concert scene where students can be quite experimental with the format, and so that they can do exciting projects. But we, of course, have to be very open-minded, encourage and listen closely to the students. That students have the possibility to influence their own education is very important to me. I work very closely with the students' union, to really have discussions on what is working and what is not, and to learn from their experiences. I am 56, and you can get very narrow-minded with age. I really want to fight that.



We do surveys with the students who are enrolling, and most of them have studied music for at least 10 years before entering.

# JULIANA HODKINSON

interviewed by Anna Jakobsson

## BIO

---

In **Juliana Hodkinson's** live, installation and hybrid compositions, sonic objects and subjects figure alongside abstract concepts and social relations. She has studied musicology and philosophy at King's College Cambridge, and Japanese Studies at the University of Sheffield, and holds a PhD from the University of Copenhagen on silence in music and sound art. She has taught composition and music aesthetics at the University of Copenhagen, Royal Danish Academy of Music, Technische Universität Berlin, the Academy of Music and Drama in Gothenburg and Darmstädter Ferienkurse, as well as giving keynotes, guest lectures and workshops throughout Europe. She is presently Associate Professor in Composition at the Grieg Academy in Bergen, and Associate Professor in Classical and Electronic Composition at the Royal Academy of Music in Aarhus. Juliana Hodkinson has previously chaired the Danish Arts Foundation and its music panels. She is presently on the Carl Nielsen Foundation's board and the interdisciplinary jury of Berlin's Hauptstadtkulturfonds.

**Anna Jakobsson:** Unlike most composers of contemporary music you did not study at a conservatory, instead studying philosophy and Japanese before completing a PhD in musicology. How come you became a composer?

**Juliana Hodkinson:** I have been composing since I was 13 or 14 and I knew that I wanted to be creative with music. It was more a question of how I would do it and within what framework. As a teenager I benefitted from weekend workshops, composition lessons and mentoring through my local county council but at various points I either actively or passively made the decision not to study composition. In my family there was a skepticism towards the idea of the conservatory and performing, as well as an excitement about university, which I shared. When I told my music teacher at school that I wanted to apply to King's College Cambridge, he nearly fell off his piano stool laughing. I began studying music at Cambridge but I was directly discouraged from joining certain contexts that were extensions of male-only clubs or circled around the male college choir. I was told by my main supervisor that one of the composers on the faculty would not accept women. Experiences and anecdotes of that kind made me feel that I would really have to fight for my place in the hierarchy and I did not associate that with creativity at all. I carried on composing and found musicians among the students to work with, but the idea of doing it institutionally and studying with one of these teachers was not a possibility for me. Paradoxically, outside of the music faculty, King's was also a pioneering institution for gender equality and a hotbed of left-leaning anarchist debate. To me, a subject like philosophy felt much more open. At that time in Cambridge, analytical philosophy was full of women. The texts that we studied were often by women - that was part of the kickback against continental philosophy. For that reason, it just seemed to me much more like a context where one could speak up, be heard, and have dynamic conversations.

**AJ:** Today you are a teacher yourself and teaching composition in various music schools. What prompted you to go in this direction?

**JH:** I was at a point in my life, both personally and compositionally, where I felt that I had something to give. I was also curious about meeting with students as a form of dialogue. Perhaps because I did not study it myself. I am still curious to find out what this subject is that people call composition, and to work on defining that together with my students. There was also the desire to be a part of an institutional context where one can work on these questions structurally, together with colleagues, to consolidate alternatives in relation to one another, challenge canons, bring in different voices and perspectives. Being a parent has opened my eyes to the many different pedagogical methods that young people meet in their schools and activities, and I felt there could be more fun to be had for both teachers and students within composition than when I was starting out.

**AJ:** You have been teaching in several places, including Bergen, Aarhus and Gothenburg. How do you compare their different structures and profiles?

**JH:** In comparison with, say, Germany, all these places in Scandinavia are characterized by some distance to the tradition of the Meisterlehre. In Germany, there is still a lot more concentration on schools of thought that profile themselves by being mutually exclusive. In Gothenburg, Aarhus and Bergen, the students chose to study there because of a range of factors, including study environment and interaction with peers - reasons not necessarily related to a certain style of composition, or the professional doors that a particular professor might open - and they are all confronted with different views among the composition teaching staff. Gothenburg, for instance, is exemplary for explicitly supporting conceptual notations and experimental creative practices across

genres. The Grieg Academy is supported by the many great frameworks for contemporary music in the city of Bergen such as Avgarde, the Borealis Festival and several great internationally-oriented teachers in the local community, so incoming students at the academy are already accustomed to trying things out and have had wide-ranging exposure to different sonic practices and the processes behind them. I originally came from the UK to Aarhus as a guest student because I had heard that the composition teachers attended each others' seminars and nurtured pluralistic debate. Today there are in fact four different lines within the composition department in Aarhus: electronic, and classical composition, singer-songwriting and 'rhythmic' composition (for rock and pop). Even though students arrive having chosen one of these lines, they see that there are also several other ways of composing, which tends to open everyone up quite a lot.

### **AJ: What are the challenges in teaching composition today?**

**JH:** There is not much pedagogical material or critical discourse on the subject, just different individualized positions that make claims to generality. Also, many teachers and students have an underlying resistance to seeing composition as a subject that can actually be taught, which means that there is not much vocabulary for evaluating what can be learned. What knowledge do students actually take out of a composition seminar or a supervision? Teaching methods and goals can seem a bit random, which is a huge problem because of the extreme degree of institutionalization in contemporary art-music life. Music academies play a central role in the frameworks of influence between major festivals, commissioning structures, publishers, funding bodies and broadcasters, so it is problematic if teaching is unfocused and moves in mysterious patterns of influence and dynasty. Of course if it were actually true that composition cannot be taught, composition courses would lose their legitimacy and funding, so composition teachers do need to believe

and demonstrate that somebody can learn something specific from following a course. Maybe this generation needs to learn about indeterminacy in relation to big data and computer-assisted composition, or about sound art, or about decolonizing, feminizing and queering music histories. Maybe they need to learn how to create local, socially sustainable practices rather than how to get international commissions?

We need to break it down into the components of what artistic skills people actually need to learn today. All this may sound strange coming from someone who rejected the idea of studying composition, but I am sure that if I had found a milieu where I could see myself reflected in the body of teachers, students, works, techniques and processes studied, I would have signed up for it. More to the point, I am sure there are many others who have the same experience and that is a crazy loss of energy for the whole field.

### **AJ: What is the focus of your own composition teaching at the moment?**

**JH:** For all my teaching this academic year, I have superimposed the topic of voice, no matter whether the students are concretely engaging with percussion, synthesizers or animal sounds. My central text is musicologist-vocalist Nina Sun Eidsheim's book *The Race of Sound*.<sup>1</sup> She departs from the acousmatic question of identifying the subject behind a speaking or singing voice, including vocaloids. Giving prominence to the listener - for better or worse - in that process of identification, Eidsheim pursues a number of historical and contemporary cases of 'mistaken identity' occurring at the intersection of essentialist assumptions about vocal subjects and about race. After the summer of 2020, I felt I could not just carry on teaching composition as if Black Lives Matter had not happened, and I realized there were many connections between essentialist positions

---

1. Eidsheim, N. S, (2019). *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre and Vocality in African American Music*. Duke University Press.

There are so many conversations within composition about the value of finding your own voice, but is that introspection really so interesting? Perhaps we should focus instead on how we use our voices together in turbulent times.

on race, gender, sexuality and talent, and my earlier point about the claim that composition 'cannot be taught,' which play out in a general resistance to diversification. Even where there is willingness, it is so often hampered by a lack of success in actually producing and sustaining environments of equality, because underlying structural issues are not addressed. There are so many conversations within composition about the value of finding your own voice, but is that introspection really so interesting? Perhaps we should focus instead on how we use our voices together in turbulent times and on what listening contributes to the mix.

**AJ:** You have recently started a new pedagogical research project that investigates student- and topic-led learning in composition, can you talk a little bit about that?

**JH:** The research project explores resonance as a model for composition practice and pedagogy.

It is attached to my position at the academy in Aarhus. I originally designed the project as a way to upgrade my own teaching, due to my own lack of studying composition and the dearth of pedagogical perspectives. A lot of compositional teaching is centered on the teacher's individual practice. However, my students are all very different people and I realized that it would be much more interesting if I thought about the group of students itself as a potential in defining the subject.

The given topic of resonance acts both as creative metaphor or trope and as an interdisciplinary toolbox for integrating different approaches to, and aspects of, working with sound compositionally. Resonance has connections to subject areas such as acoustics and psychoacoustics, harmonics and tuning systems, phenomenology, aesthetics, the interplay of live and amplified sound, audience and peer reception, inclusionary value judgements, everyday expressions and more. It has a proximity to vibrational theories coming from feminist philosophy and has been

recognized as a powerful concept within sociology, signaling patterns of shared agency.

Resonance is chosen here as a model for thinking of the creative process as both response and input to a field, and for acknowledging that aspect of shared agency in opposition to singular and individualistic artistic drives. The concept of resonance implies a fundamental pleasure of sound and freedom of flow in many directions, with potential as a uniting and holistic metaphor, in contrast to a tendency towards dissonance and exclusionary value judgments that has often been associated with art-music over the past century and more. But resonance is not only to be regarded as synonymous with harmonious consonance; rather, it is a relation that may also include noise, interference, friction and silence.

One hoped-for output of the project is to create some gamified group conversation situations which combine formalized and dynamic approaches in a compositional way, for instance using timelines and conversation scores for a dynamic interaction and knowledge-exchange. Students do not form their creative personæ on their own, rather they form them on the basis of feedback from many different connections. You can be in a harmonic or disharmonic relation to that feedback, which may lead to either a harmonious feeling of being in proportion, or an experience of friction and interference.

**AJ: What are the general tendencies among younger composers when it comes to collaboration?**

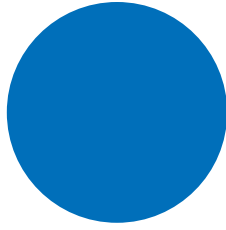
**JH:** For younger composers, collaborative work is the norm from primary school onward. But although younger composers have competence and experience in working in groups, their generation is confronted with the additional pressure of making work that can be easily commodified, which generally entails simpler, more individualistic expressions. Where are the commissions and platforms for collaborative

teams? Few and far between. Working collaboratively is also something to grow into, needing some maturity to do it successfully, and it often additionally requires a step away from notation. Of course, it is a balance between acquiring notational skills and knowing when to let go of them; students need to understand that writing a good score is not a goal in itself, rather it is a tool - but for this file-sharing, open-source, online-editing generation that is not a challenge to their artistic self-understanding.

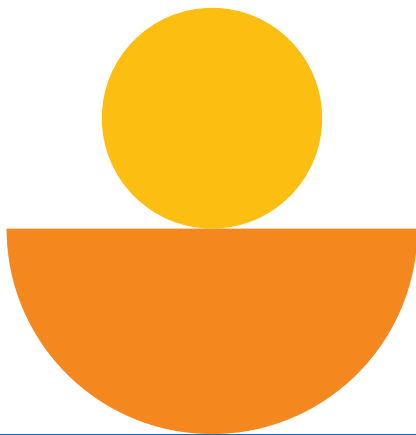
**AJ: Where do you see music education going in the future? What sort of things are you longing for or like wish for?**

**JH:** Like many, I am interested in how we can move forward on truly structural issues of diversity, access and equality on all levels. Music education needs to move directly and instantly into a post-sexist, post-colonial paradigm and not wait for the next generation to make that change. The current professional gatekeepers' answer to various challenges in this regard is often along the lines of 'we cannot effect change because the educational institutions do not turn out a diverse field of graduates.' Therefore, there is a lot of pressure on education, which we need to take very seriously, and we have to ask how courses need to change in order to fix these problems decisively. Incremental, symbolic or tokenistic gestures are absolutely insufficient. Composition courses will probably need to work with patchworks of electives and cross-institutional collaborations, in order to cater for a bigger range of student interests and demands. If composition teachers cannot deliver post-patriarchal syllabi, then they have to ally themselves with those who can.

Another important point is the conundrum of migration, structural nationalism and privilege. Academies want to be international, and above all they need the extra fees that international students bring, in order to sustain or boost the number of students on their courses. This means, firstly, that



I see how initiatives that I was a part of putting into actions years ago have not had the effects that I assumed they would have. Nothing is getting smoother for anybody, and certainly not for younger generations.



- depending on the students' citizenship - there are some people in the class whose study place is an organic step in their gradual development and others for whom it's been a major life decision to migrate, find the fees, and self-organize in a new country. It also means that academies in, say, Denmark, turn out a relatively large number of transnational composer postgraduates who go on to make a huge contribution to musical life within the local-national network but are excluded from many opportunities and regarded as exceptional exotica. Basically, wherever there is state funding, there is structural nationalism and therefore problems for transnationals.

Structural sexism in composition syllabi and faculties is still a huge problem. I still find that whenever I enter new educational contexts, I am typically the first woman that has ever been accepted into these various teaching roles. Despite being welcomed and feeling the hope that colleagues and students invest in me, I cannot change paradigms if I am appointed as a token female within a massively male-oriented system. So, progress happens when it comes from the top, when it is adopted widely and consistently sustained and when it moves with immediate effect. I see how initiatives that I was a part of putting into actions years ago have not had the effects that I assumed they would have. Nothing is getting smoother for anybody, and certainly not for younger generations. How to continue studying, working artistically and teaching after all the different developments that we have seen the consequences of in the past year? I feel that we have to separate ourselves from all kinds of inherited ways of thinking. That goes for everything.



+FOLLOWUP

# MYRIAM BOUCHER

interviewed by **Vanessa Massera**

*Translated from French by Vanessa Massera and Brandon Farnsworth*

## BIO

---

**Myriam Boucher** is president of CEC, VP of Codes d'Accès, composer and video artist.

**Vanessa Massera:** As a new and digital music artist you have many roles: composer, video artist, VP of Codes d'Accès, artistic director of the Montreal Video Music Festival, president of the Canadian Electroacoustic Community, etc. How do you believe your role as an artist informs your more administrative roles and vice-versa?

**Myriam Boucher:** Above all, I believe that artists have a role to play in their community, not only through their art but also as citizens. We often say that artists are a driving force. I very much believe that. Being involved in the community is part of my artistic process. To share, to meet the public and to open the dialogue. The more that dialogue creates an open, sharing space, the more mindsets will evolve. Most people do not understand what we do, but I hope most people are also open to new ideas.

My administrative role is part of my work as a politically engaged artist. As artists, we often work alone and are very centered on our own practice, our limited network. These dynamics are far better understood when we are part of organisations like CEC or Codes d'Accès, where artists are part of a larger network and where we are involved with people who have different realities. The more we are aware of larger issues, the easier it is to reflect on how to make things better.

**VM:** How can artists take on such roles despite their already precarious situations?

**MB:** As artists, if we do not try to change our precarious situations ourselves, not many others will take interest in our cause. Our job is to work with the budgets that we get. Artists do not need to get involved in a bunch of organisations, or involve themselves politically, but simply take a position, like not accepting ill-paying contracts. We have to affirm that our work is worth something and maintain solidarity with our field so that we get reasonable

salaries. This means not accepting playing at a bar for a case of beer, or taking a contract that only pays in visibility. Not accepting extreme work conditions either, like being called day and night, on weekends, and so on. Those are sources of exhaustion for an artist, that make them even more precarious. This should not exist; we should all individually speak up about these issues as artists. Precarity is not only about money, it is also a lifestyle. We can choose to refuse that too.

**VM:** Does Montreal succeed in portraying the diversity of electronic and new music practices? Can our institutions do better?

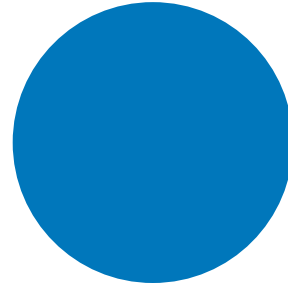
**MB:** Electronic and new music practices are not very strong when it comes to diversity. At the same time, I wonder if our definitions of this kind of music is not itself a very closed and limited style. If you look at digital art festivals around the world, it is always the same artists and styles, even if it changes a little bit every year. There can also be very negative reactions to works that are clearly different, as it is a very closed field.

The way it is right now, Montreal is not very diverse. If the institutions changed their understanding of new and electronic music, we would probably see a greater diversity of practices.

**VM:** What would it take to open up these forms of music making?

**MB:** First of all, openness by institutions with regard to aesthetics, styles, cultures. I understand that often when one is an artistic director or on an artistic committee or promoter, we have preferences. For example, on the artistic committee for Codes d'Accès, we all have personal preferences but we always have to put that aside for the benefit of artistic quality. No matter what your tastes are, one must be interested in quality before all else, which will really help to open up new propositions. There are a lot of great

Artists do not need to get involved in a bunch of organisations, or involve themselves politically, but simply take a position, like not accepting ill-paying contracts.



ideas that break out of the usual framework, meaning that there is often a process of having to get used to them. In order to find this kind of work we cannot just program what is cool but rather see the broader picture a bit more.

**VM: Is artistic quality in and of itself more important than what a project can bring, for example in terms of diversity?**

**MB:** How we position ourselves in our field and what we have to say is more important than the technical side of musical composition or style. When a jury hears 10 perfect, similar pieces, it is clear to them that the artists are using the tools well but the question of what we gain from it remains. Programming concerts of just these kinds of pieces for three days raises the question of what we are doing as artists, and whether we can be more than technicians.

**VM: Could musical education be more accessible for women and minorities and if so, how?**

**MB:** I do not have experience teaching at the primary or secondary levels, so I cannot say as much about that, but I know there is a huge amount of work to do. It is really an ecosystem consisting of both institutions and the scene in general. Students want to have projects that will work not only in school but in the artistic field as well, and will themselves pursue a certain aesthetic in order to fit into that mould.

The more academic institutions and festivals are open to new propositions, the more it will foster confidence in students when they want to explore new ideas. They will feel there is a place where they can be recognised and encouraged. I think this work should be done everywhere, both inside of universities and outside of them. When teaching, we should also be presenting a greater diversity of approaches, giving students access to styles of expression that are less institutionalised.

**VM: Usually in schools, not presenting a wide range of practices is often rationalized as being very focussed on one specific kind of practice.**

**MB:** Exactly. One hesitates to think one really has a place here. Even in digital music, there are very strong positions, but ones that encourage a form of expression that women do not tend to identify with. I do not believe in the idea of gendered music but there are still some approaches that we mostly see in male collaborations. Often, women have the reflex of thinking that if they do not make that sort of work, they will not be booked. It is a question of representation, and one that connects with diversity, because it is also not all men who make testosterone-filled music.

**VM: Being involved with two major institutions on the emerging scene in Quebec and Canada, Codes d'Accès and CEC, what are the measures that you are putting in place to represent diversity in your activities and programmes?**

**MB:** I cannot speak in the name of those organisations but I can speak to my own experience. At Codes d'Accès, the artistic director, Simon Chiolini, is a good example of a very open person. He is able to put aside his personal tastes to support interesting projects, encouraging diversity in programming. I was on the artistic committee between 2017 and 2019, and still follow what is done there, and it is very diverse indeed.

On the other hand, there has also been a need to open up the calls for works. After looking at the results of one call, we wondered: where are the women? Where should we put up our call for them to see that we wanted them to apply? We promoted the call a bit more to get more projects by women. There were a lot in interpretation and not so much in composition. After pushing for women, we managed to get a result of 50/50 in the proposals. This was mostly through simple solutions, like making a post in the F\*EM [Femmes en musique] Facebook group. In our last call, one third of proposals were from women, which is better than what we see in universities, but we should still try to reach 50/50. We

are putting in place a plan with a special committee to be able to have more drastic measures to know what to do when we do not reach that quota. We are also probably changing our diversity criteria next year, and are thinking about how we can choose criteria that encourage diversity, changing from focusing purely on compositional technique toward relevance. This can also be small things, for example on our CEC Facebook page, instead of just having 5 photos of men on the landing page, putting photos of women too.

**VM: Sometimes when we do not have the experience, change can seem to need monumental effort but sometimes a small, simple action can make the difference.**

**MB:** What is delicate is that even when trying to promote diversity, one cannot select female projects just because they are by women. I do not think women want that. If you are chosen for the quality of your work, it is something else entirely, making it a very delicate question. I have never been in an organisation that did that. What is interesting is that when we reach 50/50 in the proposals, then the selection results pretty much follow suit, even without using quotas.

At the organisational level, we can also exercise affirmative action. At Codes d'Accès, where I am currently on the board, if I leave, they will choose a woman to replace me before taking a man and the same at CEC.

**VM: The COVID-19 pandemic has been affecting the Canadian economy for several months. Do you believe it will have an impact on the new music scene?**

**MB:** My situation as an artist is very privileged. I had a research project in France for half of the year, so I had not really booked shows. The few I had maintained their contracts, or were postponed.

I am lucky I do not live from tours, though if I was a performer, it would be a different story. I can deal with it because I live from composing and research. For others who live from shows, what is happening is really bad and will affect the community for years.

I think the biggest impact is that we will have to rethink our monetisation models. For example, there are festivals that do online events but do not pay. We all do it because we think our work will be promoted but it is not good. This is when we see we are in a really precarious field and that we really have to do something about it. I do not have an answer but we have to work together to find solutions. We have to be involved more than ever in our field and take initiative, the government will not do it for us.

**VM: Having played internationally for several years, do you see benefits in those exchanges for the development of your practice and new music in general?**

**MB:** In my practice, I see huge benefits. I started traveling internationally when I was a bachelor's student in digital music. As I do a lot of audiovisual work, I was visiting mostly experimental film festivals in Europe, which was like a slap in the face. In Montreal, there is a very strong style and a strong scene but it is not very diverse, something that you realize when you travel and encounter many other styles and ways of thinking. It also made me confident to come up with ideas that stick out of my field a bit.

**VM: What are your biggest hopes for the coming years when it comes to representation in new music in Quebec?**

**MB:** I think in Quebec right now there is an opening up to new kinds of practices. There are many students who are now mixing live instruments with electroacoustic music. For example, it is not taboo anymore to have violin in a digital music piece. Of course some composers will like it less but it is more accepted. My hope is that this diversification continues

to unfold, better representing a broad diversity of practices. If we all stay in our own corners, we will not improve the situation for women, or for minorities either.

How we position ourselves in our field and what we have to say is more important than the technical side of musical composition or style.

---

FOLLOW UP SECOND EDITION

with Myriam Boucher by Vanessa Massera

**Vanessa Massera: Last time we spoke, we talked about artists sometimes having to deal with precarious positions and their political involvement in the community. How do you see precarity affecting artists during and after the COVID-19 pandemic? Have you witnessed setbacks in the field?**

**Myriam Boucher:** Quebec's cultural milieu is extremely affected by the pandemic. Venues and museums are closed, festivals are cancelled. There are no more shows and exhibitions, except for a few presented online. I am under the impression that this has encouraged some artists to mobilize. To express how important art is. That art must be taken care of, not taken for granted. Because making art in this context leads us above all to question what meaning

it has. But on the other side, my observations also tell me that it has discouraged many artists from pursuing their careers in this field. It feels sad.

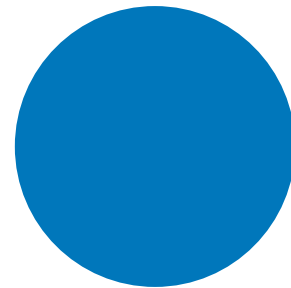
**VM:** Being part of many networks and platforms in the Montreal new music scene, have you seen these networks provide support for affected artists? Have people been able to find resilience in coming together in extended networks, even if at a distance?

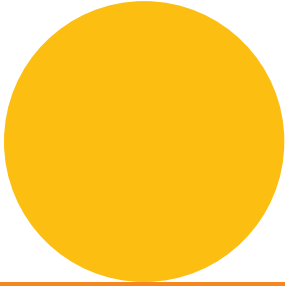
**MB:** Several organizations, venues and festivals chose to pay artists the fees they had planned, even if the concerts were cancelled. Some festivals have also decided to take place in a virtual format. This encouraged many artists to continue their work, as it was going to be presented. This may have helped to reach international audiences, as online dissemination is not really limited by the geographic location of a concert venue.

**VM:** How has your presence at the international level been affected by travel restrictions? How do you see international exchange being adapted to this new context?

**MB:** Overall, it is very difficult to work with international artists in this context. I had to cancel several collaborative projects that were supposed to take place in Europe. One realizes that human contact is essential in artistic collaboration. All my international concerts and creative residencies have also been cancelled. I was lucky enough to have some projects online, it did a lot of good! But we cannot wait to meet in venues or in pubs, to see each other again, to see the public again. It is also part of our work, it nourishes our creation. Right now I can see that a lot of people miss it.

I am under the impression that this has encouraged some artists to mobilize. To express how important art is. That art must be taken care of, not taken for granted. Because making art in this context leads us above all to question what meaning it has.





## **Information about the editors**



**Brandon Farnsworth**, born in 1991 (Montreal), is an independent music curator, and research associate at the Zurich University of the Arts Institute for Theory, where he studied classical music performance and transdisciplinary studies. In 2020, he completed his doctoral degree in historical musicology at the University of Music Carl Maria von Weber Dresden with magna cum laude. He is also an affiliated researcher with the joint Epistemologies of Aesthetic Practice doctoral program of swissuniversities. Recent publications include his dissertation *Curating Contemporary Music Festivals* (transcript Verlag), and a special issue of *OnCurating Journal* with the curatorial collective Gender Relations in New Music.

**Anna Jakobsson**, born in 1988, is a Swedish creative producer and artist-researcher. Her practice expands over the fields of contemporary music, opera and theatre and is distinguished by an interest in feminine narratives and non-hierarchical working methods. She holds a MA in Performance Practice as Research from the Royal Central School of Speech in London. Since 2017 she works as a creative producer for Konstmusiksysterar (Sisters in Contemporary Music), a network of artists, producers and educators working to increase the representation of women, transgender- and non-binary people in new music.

**Vanessa Massera**, PhD, born 1987 (Montréal), is a sound artist and performer. She specialised in electroacoustic music, a medium she now uses as a means to express poetic ideas whilst being anchored in the many different spaces and cultural environments she is inspired by. Her works have been performed amongst others at the ZKM (DE), NWEAMO Festival (JP/US), EMUFest (IT), Miso Music (PT), NYCEMF (US), TES (CA), Ai -Maako (CL), FRST (SE), MOKS (EE), with *Éclats de Feux* receiving the JTTP Canadian Electroacoustic Award. In 2019, she received her PhD at the University of Sheffield with the practice-based research subject Environment in Electroacoustic Music.