

contact

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The Contemporary Music Network: A Continuing Discussion

The ensuing discussion took place at 105 Piccadilly, London on September 8, 1977. In addition to the five members of this year's ISCM British Jury which was meeting at the time to select scores for the 1978 festival, five others were invited to be present, three representing in particular the fields of jazz and regional promotion, the remaining two being the Music Officer at the Arts Council responsible for the Contemporary Music Network and myself. What follows is intended in part as a continuation of 'Contemporary Music Network — A Discussion', Tempo No. 119 (December 1976), pp. 7-14, in which three of the present group also featured, and Paul Fromm's response, 'The British Contemporary Music Network: An American View', Tempo No. 120 (March 1977), pp. 53-54. Particularly in view of the fact that it was impossible to represent all the parties concerned and all shades of opinion, the contributors would join me in seeing it as part of a continuing debate, and contributions, particularly in the form of letters to the editor, are invited for future issues of Contact to give a fuller perspective to a very important area of discussion.

(Keith Potter)

KEITH POTTER What were and are the aims of the Contemporary Music Network and how far do you think it has achieved those aims in the five or six years it's been running?

ANNETTE MORREAU The idea for a Network originally emerged in about 1970 and was due principally to the fact that outside London there were very few performances of contemporary music. What there were were probably not adequately rehearsed. If there was any likelihood of adequately rehearsed concerts, they were much too expensive, and so the opportunities for performance were very small. So the idea was to try and link current London performances with regional tours. It was hoped at the beginning to have bases, one in each Regional Arts Association area — the RAAs were just being set up at this time — which would be regularly supplied with concerts. In fact, when the RAAs — with whom, of course, the scheme has always worked in collaboration — were asked to suggest places, they each suggested several rather than just one, and therefore one could say that the impact of the concerts has been somewhat diffused.

There are two obvious aspects to the Network. One is that if you can arrange a number of performances, you're going to make the costs slightly cheaper per performance. The other is that you hope to raise the standard of performance; of course you may also even encourage performers to learn particular works which they wouldn't learn, or they'd be less keen to learn, without the guarantee of a certain number of performances.

As for achievements: well, we've achieved the fact that there are concerts, that promoters do take the concerts and the tours take place: there are now something like 100 concerts each year. I think that the idea of the Network being a showcase to encourage promoters to engage groups to play contemporary music independently of the scheme has not worked too well yet. I think there's a danger of the Network having become the country's diet of new music. We had hoped that the RAAs would introduce their own backup schemes, so that if promoters

presented a concert on the Network and were interested in further performances the following year, the association would then be in a position to help with this. In some areas, particularly that covered by the Northern Contemporary Music Circuit for instance, this has happened, but generally speaking there isn't, I think, a vastly increased interest in contemporary music as a result of the Network yet.

KP Is that because it was too idealistic an aim, or have you really felt that things could actually still go a lot further following the same lines?

AM Certainly it's idealistic, but I don't think one should be under the illusion that five years is going to make up for 50 years of lack of education about what music has been doing. So I think it's unrealistic to expect a great deal. Perhaps it's unfortunate that the scheme has coincided with a difficult period economically ...

ARNOLD WHITTALL But aren't the RAAs going to say 'Fine, you offer this so we'll spend our money on non-contemporary music, on things which aren't offered or are more popular'? Unless you were actually to cut off the Contemporary Music Network completely, it's perhaps unlikely that they will take over or even supplement it.

AM I don't think cutting off the Network would help. Before it existed there was extremely little going on. I suspect that things would go back to square one if the scheme were cut off.

AW Oh quite, I think this could well happen. But at the moment, because of what you provide, they don't feel any obligation to provide more.

AM I think the Arts Council is in a very difficult position here. The RAAs are not our subsidiaries and we can't tell them how they should spend their money.

JOHN HOPKINS When you thought about the RAAs taking over and developing their own backup schemes, did you imagine that they would do it like the Network originally did, offering guarantees rather than providing things? Or did you hope that they might even go as far as to do what the Network now does and pay fees and travel expenses in full?

AM I think I felt that if the Network encouraged enough interest for promoters in the regions to want to put on performances by groups that they knew, then they could ask their RAAs for guarantees to help. From the point of view of Music in the Arts Council, the Network is surprising in that the groups and the programmes are *chosen*: direct provision that is. Normally we are here to subsidise other people's wishes. But the Arts Council relies on the British Section of the ISCM¹ to advise on programmes, so I think it's a reasonable system. Obviously there are going to be criticisms of what's been chosen. But one of the essential things is that it shall be done by a publicly accountable committee. I think the Arts Council might be happier, however, if the Network could be organised independently of the Council. But I've always argued that the safeguard in this kind of scheme is that it shall be open to criticism from the public.

KP If it's going to be a direct patron, which is what you're saying, it's very important that it is and should be seen to be not by any means the only patron of contemporary music. Hence the criticism regarding the possibility of a monopoly arising from this situation.

AM Yes, but I think for the RAAs themselves to dictate programmes might be more difficult. The committee that the Arts Council uses is made up of musicians from all over the country and one therefore hopes that it's representative.

MICHAEL NYMAN How are groups chosen to tour?

AM The procedure is that a small group from the main ISCM British Section chooses the programmes for the season. We make our selection from groups that have applied, from consideration of particular works that we want to be heard (what you might call 20th century classics such as Messiaen's *Trois petites liturgies* this season), from particular performances that we know have taken place, from the notion that certain groups must be kept alive to keep the musical culture of this country varied, from trying to produce a balanced programme: from all these things the choices are made.

MN And then those choices are circulated to the RAAs?

AM When they've been approved by the full ISCM committee they're circulated to all promoters who have expressed interest and who have *some* proven record of being able to put concerts on, plus the RAAs. The RAAs are always asked about the suitability of promoters in their region for taking a particular concert. After that the promoters 'bid' for the concerts they would like.

MN But how is that selection made, of who gets what?

AM Well, that's done in view of various factors. The suitability of a promoter to take a group; size of venue; geographical considerations of how a tour will work. And things like the fact that many of the promoters only put on concerts on certain days of the week, or have a series: by and large a series is better advertised, so possibly this may take priority. There are obviously problems: on the whole there are always more promoters bidding for concerts than we can afford. Without, that is, expanding the Network enormously and so turning it into the country's diet of contemporary music, which would be most undesirable.

KP John, you're Music Organiser at the Arnolfini Gallery in Bristol. How does all this look from your end?

JH It's very good in some ways because I couldn't really afford to put on a series of concerts at all without the Network. But on the other hand I've got very little money to spend outside the Network concerts, presumably because I've *got* these concerts. You see, I don't feel I've got enough money to make anything of the Network concerts in terms of other activities. I also feel that I don't have very much choice in what comes on the Network in any one year, so it's always a question of taking these things off the shelf in pre-packaged forms. My aim now is to try to consider one financial year as some kind of structure. My ambition is to attempt to build up a whole year's related programme around the nucleus of the Network concerts ...

KP Do you have a design you want the Network concerts to fit into, or do the concerts dictate the design to you?

JH I don't see in the way things are run at the moment that there's going to be any alternative to trying to fit other activities around the Network concerts.

AM I do think that the Arnolfini is a classic example of how an RAA could back up what a promoter has been doing. In fact the Arnolfini is subsidised for its music activities outside the Network by South West Arts.

JH However, I don't see the answer to this problem yet, since out of SWA's budget I should think we get about as much as we've any right to expect, considering that the South West is such a colossal region.

GUY PROTHEROE Is it possible for the RAAs to make requests for groups to be put on the Network?

AM Anybody can make suggestions.

AW But do the RAAs?

AM Not often.

MN Are suggestions from others taken seriously?

AM Yes. Every suggestion is taken seriously.

CHARLES ALEXANDER It seems to me that while the method of selection you've been describing is in a sense democratic, there is one stage missing. When you have a Network of promoters, some of them well established, such as Arnolfini, it's surely wrong that they should not be consulted, at least given the chance early on to make their suggestions.

AM They *can* make suggestions.

CA But are they actually asked? Does a circular go out?

AM No, and for a number of reasons. At the beginning we put virtually every performing group in the country on the list. And obviously tours couldn't work out in this way. Asking every promoter and RAA in the country is going to produce an enormous number of suggestions and there are consequently going to be an enormous number of promoters and so on who'll be very disappointed because their ideas haven't been taken up. The idea of having a committee that is geographically representative of the country is that those people can keep in touch with what the RAA and the promoters in their area want on the Network.

CA I can understand that. But surely by now the Network has established a number of promoters who are liable to take concerts every year, and it would be reasonable to make a direct approach to them.

JH But the committee members aren't officially told to go out and canvass in their areas. Unless they do, the idea of the committee being geographically representative is meaningless.

AW But the committee members surely have their fingers on the pulse to some extent, even if they don't canvass opinions directly?

CA I think you could avoid the problem of false expectations simply by putting a paragraph in the circular to explain the situation. Travelling around the country a bit and coming into contact with local promoters and RAAs, the main complaint I hear about the Network is that they seem to be excluded from the decision making.

AM I just think it's impractical. And here we return to the question of backup: it's in *that* situation that the promoters should have entirely their own decisions: they should be asking their RAAs for money to put on concerts of their choice outside the Network. If the Network were not considered as the diet of contemporary music, but as a showcase of what there is, then it would be very much easier. There will, incidentally, from now on be a representative from the RAAs on the committee.

TIM SOUSTER Though a letter such as has just been described would also produce some interesting information about the promoters themselves. It's perhaps understandable that they may not identify sufficiently with the groups they get and so there's only a minimum incentive for them to engage personally in any real promotion. And yet promoters vary so much in their attitudes. The best promoters I've known have been in the regions. Some might come up with some amazingly good suggestions: someone in their area whom no-one knows about, for instance.

KP It seems to me important to take advantage of the knowledge that's available, wherever it comes from. In terms of organising concerts and getting audiences, how dependent are you on individual promoters?

AM Almost entirely. The original idea of the collaboration with the RAAs was in fact to use an organisation that's more on the ground than we at the Arts Council could possibly be, in order to make sure that the promoters were handling the concerts in the best way.

I think it raises the question of how to sell contemporary music; I'm afraid I don't think the RAAs are any better informed than the promoters in this respect. It's a very specialised and indeed time-consuming problem, and the RAAs have many other things to do.

RONALD LUMSDEN Do the promoters and the RAAs know how disappointed the Arts Council is at their response? Would it be worth circulating this discussion, for instance?

AM They *have* received the *Tempo* discussion; I think this one should go too.

AW I see that in *Tempo* Tim Souster made the suggestion, which was subsequently taken up by Paul Fromm, that there should be a 'travelling person' to assist you and to act as a promoter travelling around in a way which you can't do. Is the problem about this a financial one?

AM There is a problem in that at present the Arts Council has a moratorium on staff appointments. But anyway, I'm not convinced that someone coming from London could do any better. The idea of using local promoters is that they have local contacts. It would be much more worth while to try and help the local promoters.

KP In his article Paul Fromm was stressing the educational importance of such a person more than just the idea that he or she should 'go out and sell'. Obviously the two are in some ways linked, but it shouldn't be just a question of selling advertising space or whatever, it should be an educational concern. Do you see this as being very important?

AM Yes, I think it's absolutely vital. I think the incidence of small audiences is not only to do with the fact that a lot of people find contemporary music strange and difficult to listen to, but the fact that there is no positive encouragement and little interest in the schools ...

AW Or in the universities ...

KP Yes, when the BBC put their Invitation Concerts in different universities around the country, this connection with educational establishments wasn't entirely successful, was it?

AM I don't know what the audience figures were for the Invitation Concerts, but the BBC carries a certain prestige: the fact that it's the BBC coming to record is possibly likely to bring people in as much as the music being played. I know that the BBC has phased out its Invitation Concerts largely as a result of the Contemporary Music Network being set up. But the Network's experience in universities is not a particularly good one, contrary to popular belief about audiences there in general.

KP Arnold, you in particular have worked in universities outside London in the past; what are your experiences in this respect and what do you think can be done now?

AW I can go right back to the BBC Invitation Concerts in Cambridge in the early 60s and remember that they were very canny about trying to attract local interest. I recall a Roberto Gerhard premiere, for example, when the Guildhall in Cambridge was surprisingly full: not just because of that, because there were, if I remember rightly, Haydn piano sonatas and other things as well. But there was a sense of occasion, a local interest which seemed to catch on, partly perhaps because this was probably going to be the only concert of its kind for the whole season.

I remember also at Nottingham, before the Network and where we had no BBC out-of-town Invitation Concerts, that it was very difficult to promote such things at all: in the university we had to arrange concerts ourselves, which meant a great deal of extra administrative work, dealing directly with agents and so on, and certainly we always used to lose money. Although

it depended: we had the Pierrot Players in their first year; they had just enough publicity in places like the *Radio Times* to bring in a slightly larger audience than a university concert of modern music would normally have done. But the real problem then *was* the lack of co-ordination and the feeling that this was just an isolated event which couldn't be followed up in the way that the Network concerts can. So I can't altogether share the apparent feeling that the Network is in the doldrums: it *must* be of enormous value to the regional centres because it provides the system and the regularity which are so vital if you're going to build up an audience. And yet I can see the problem of the middlemen in the regions who are going to sit back and say 'Fine, that's our dose of modernity for this year'. So ultimately I feel a bit pessimistic about how the thing can do more than coast along in the way that it's doing now. And yet perhaps we *shouldn't* be too pessimistic: it *is* successful for what it sets out to do, and it's very difficult to think of ways of improving it.

TS I think that rather than becoming a link between centralisation and regionalism, which is what it was originally intended as, the Network has resulted in a regional ghetto into which contemporary music can be siphoned off. This is simply because the tours are no longer connected, as I believe they originally were, to London concerts. Is that right?

AM Well, they were hardly ever connected to London concerts because the tours are actually arranged well ahead of London programmes, and it became incidental whether a London performance emerged or not. I think, however, that this *is* a mistake, and it's quite interesting in terms of developments over the last five years. When the scheme was thought up there were a fair number of contemporary music concerts in London chasing the same small audience, and almost nothing in the regions. Now I think that there are concerts of very high quality provided by the Network which don't get into London. This is something we must reconsider.

TS The programmes still have to be given an airing in London simply because the media are so hopelessly centralised; they still have no awareness even of the variety of venues in London, let alone making the effort to go out into the regions to report, with the exception of *The Guardian* which anyway is a regional paper. But there's no national review at all for a lot of the programmes, simply because none of the critics get to them.

AW And perhaps because they don't contain world premieres.

AM This brings up another thing that Paul Fromm remarked on in his article: we have a lot of music that's orphaned once it's had its first performance.

MN I know it's not typical, but Steve Reich always saw the Network concerts as a kind of penance for the London concert. The London concert would always introduce the new work so that it would get all the critical acclaim, and the regional concerts would contain older music that had previously been heard in London. Since the regions don't get the new work, the people have to come to London for it and therefore maybe don't go when it later turns up in the regions. This happened with *Drumming* last season.

AM But that's going back to the syndrome of premieres. After all the Network wasn't set up for premieres; it was set up to make sure that the best works were toured.

MN^s And *Drumming* is cheaper to tour than *Music for 18 Musicians*.

AM But I don't think that Steve Reich is a very fair example to take, because judging from the large numbers of groups that *want* to tour, I don't think they *do* regard the Network as a penance.

MN No, I'm sure most of them don't. For instance, there's been absolutely no English experimental music on the Network: only Cornelius Cardew's three concerts of his own piano music three years ago. It seems that these imported Americans, Reich and Philip Glass, have completely covered that kind of music as far as the Network is concerned. Now if you say you want it to be representative, there is a lot of experimental music which has never been toured.

AM Well, in an ideal situation ...

MN No, *not* in an ideal situation, but in a situation which is supposed to be representative of the new music being produced in Britain today.

AM Well, I suppose I don't really agree with you, because the Network is looking at music internationally, and if the consensus of opinion is that the music being produced by Reich and Glass is of more interest than what's produced at home ...

MN But who *knows* what is being produced?

AM One hopes that the ISCM British Section committee members do.

IAN CARR We're also subsidising the audience, you must remember, it's not just a subsidy for musicians. If a certain type of music draws reasonable numbers of people, those people should be subsidised if necessary.

MN But from an educational point of view, it means that outside London people's tastes are going to be geared towards Reich and Glass, and the home product, which is related but different, is never going to be heard. So they'll always think it's inferior, which is more or less what you were saying, or at least it's always going to bring in a smaller audience.

IC There's a danger in chauvinism ...

TS The impact that experimental musicians have made on the regions as a whole is absolutely infinitesimal. There hasn't been enough music performed, it's true, but I'm afraid the experimental music that ought to have been disseminated can only be played by the musicians who specialise in it. They don't play any other music, and I wouldn't have said there had been groups capable of sustaining complete programmes.

IC The main problem is the complete ignorance of contemporary music in this country, at large, wouldn't you say? For example, in Italy they have one hour a day of contemporary music on the radio, and during the summer when I was there they had 30 minutes of jazz at lunchtime every day on television. Well no wonder there's a great interest there; and it's the same in Germany. How much is there on radio in Britain? Very little: 'Music in our time' ... This is the really serious problem.

AM I think there's a class system, if you like, at work here: opera is 'upper class' and contemporary music is relegated somewhere pretty low.

IC There is truth in this: snobbery has absolutely severed England artistically; there are clearly two layers.

AM Of course opera has its place, but if you don't provide the money for contemporary music as well there's never going to be much demand for it.

TS Also a vast amount of almost evangelical zeal in the music field in this country has been put into the development of the appreciation of opera, educationally, mainly through the structure of the music academies: it goes right the way across the country.

MN It's not only opera, it's old music of every kind.

IC Anybody who has no confidence will be stuck with old music, because you're safe with it, the values are all proven. The thing that I notice in Germany and other countries is the immense confidence of the people involved in the media: they don't give a damn what anybody else thinks, if they feel something is worth

putting on, they do it. That's what's totally lacking in England.

CA Derek Bailey once said that people don't like music, they only like certain types of music. It's the fact that so few people cross the gaps between different categories — not only between 'serious' music and jazz, for instance, but all the very different kinds of music contained under those names — that's a part of the problem.

TS Again the BBC is partly responsible for this attitude.

RL What sort of public are we aiming for anyway?

AM I think that in this country we lack what I think perhaps Ian has been alluding to: a radical left and underground movement that has a real association with contemporary art. I think most of the countries you're thinking about have that.

TS It varies from country to country.

AM Musicians in this country aren't very interested in playing contemporary music either.

CA There's no centre for contemporary music in London: I'm sure this has something to do with it.

AM I have a feeling that one large well-organised contemporary music festival which got wide critical coverage would help promoters outside London to take the promotion of contemporary music more seriously.

AW So it comes back to London in the end.

IC We haven't solved *anything* ...

NOTE:

¹ The British Section of the International Society for Contemporary Music is a sub-committee of the Music Panel of the Arts Council. (For the historical background to this see the discussion in *Tempo* No. 119). The list of present members is as follows: David Cain, Ian Carr, John Casken, Gordon Crosse, Martin Dalby, David Drew, Peter Evans, Charles Fox, Anthony Gilbert, Alan Hacker, Barry Iliffe, Oliver Knussen, William Mathias, Nicholas Maw, Evan Parker, Anthony Payne, Judith Pearce, Stephen Plaistow, Veronica Slater, Tim Souster, Thomas Wilson, Hugh Wood.

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