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David Wright

Preserving the Species

Alan Rump, *How we Treat our Composers* (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1982), £2.00 + £1.25 postage and packing [typescript report available from the Arts Council, 105 Piccadilly, London W1CV 0AU]

Dr Alan Rump's study *How we Treat our Composers* demonstrates the sorry position of most contemporary composers. A cursory glance at the current musical scene gives the impression of a welter of activity, showing the profession to be more essential to today's society (when even washing-up liquid needs a jingle) than previously. However, more detailed examination reveals that while Tchaikovsky is alive and prospering in the Albert Hall, few 'serious contemporary composers' (to use one of Rump's classifications) gain significant material benefit from their work. This report highlights the paradoxical position that faces, with very few exceptions, contemporary composers in Britain. It shows that present conditions ensure that the ratio of financial return on a composer's work is such that the greater his creative activity, the smaller—in proportion to effort expended—is his income. As the report forcefully states:

The obsolescence of our copyright law severely depresses the income of composers, publishers and record companies. A country which has got used to obtaining its new music cheaply harbours institutions which keep it cheap.

This passage illustrates the main thrust of the report, namely the inadequacy of the provision made by our society to secure and propagate the work of contemporary composers and the meagre financial return they receive in consequence. This inadequacy is so marked that it helps to define the term 'contemporary music' as surely as any statement of aesthetics.

Alan Rump's study is the result of a questionnaire sent to the Arts Council in preparation for the Council of Europe's Symposium on Aid to Musical Creation, held in October 1979. It was felt that the questionnaire itself was insufficient as a means of representing the position of the contemporary composer in Britain, and that there was a need for a more comprehensive survey; accordingly, the Department of Education and Science commissioned a report from Dr Rump, a lecturer in music at Bristol University, who had previously written an Arts Council paper, *Money for Composers* (1977).¹ The result, *How we Treat our Composers*, has eventually been made available by the Arts Council, with the caveat that the author's views do not necessarily represent those of the Council itself.

The report is presented under seven chapter headings, of which the first four ('The Law', 'Publishing', 'Recording', and 'Broadcasting') indicate those forces whose operation serves to regulate the availability and dissemination of a composer's work. The financial constraints that determine the attitude of many performing organisations to programming contemporary music (and they are not only those arising from box-office prudence) are dealt with in chapter 5, 'Public Performance', and the process of assessment leading to the disbursement of commissioning fees is described in chapter 6, 'The Grant Givers'. For the final chapter, 'The Composer's Living', Rump draws together the interaction of these

forces in an examination of the likely financial position of various types of composer at different stages in their careers.

This study is impressive in its comprehensiveness and in the lucidity of the presentation and evaluation of material, which make for an unexpectedly readable document. Certain aspects that create an imbalance in the picture as a whole, such as the emphasis given in particular to one Regional Arts Association (South-West Arts) and the music course at Bristol University, together with the scant attention paid to areas such as electronic music, jazz, and improvisation, obviously reflect the author's preferences and experience, but they do not invalidate the main causes for concern that the study expresses. However, the author's proposals for dealing with these would have been more strongly emphasised and more effectively displayed had a summary of recommendations been made.

The first problem to emerge in any discussion of the 'contemporary composer' is that the term does not give the reader a clear indication of the sort of music that is meant. It is the composer's manner rather than his substance that frequently determines his financial reward. Indeed, for many listeners the contemporary composer is actually an irrelevance, because as Rump points out:

As the twentieth century has progressed, the supply of music on the air, on record and tape and in the concert hall has increased so much that the audience . . . has [according to taste] been able to splinter into many different 'specialist' preferences.

In a footnote Rump adds 'In doing so the audience mirrors the development of the art and language of composition in this century.' The composer is therefore presented with stylistic decisions which may or may not involve him in some sort of artistic compromise: bluntly put, is the composer to work in such a way as to produce music that is considered 'viable' in consumer terms—in which case he has a chance of having his work propagated in the market place by established publishers, recording companies, and the BBC; or is he to allow himself to be categorised as a 'specialist' composer, writing for a restricted audience?

It is the degree of availability of a composer's work in both published and recorded form (which usually reflects the accessibility of his musical language) that determines his commercial success. Rump shows that publishers now rely on the royalties that accrue from broadcasts, recordings, and performances, rather than those from printed music. This makes them reluctant to handle the work of 'specialist' composers, who are therefore forced to rely on commissions to finance their work. Not only do commissions provide an erratic and uncertain source of income, but they usually guarantee only one performance of the commissioned piece; Rump points out that it is the failure of commissioning bodies to fund subsequent performances of a work and its further propagation by means of a score or recording that most hinders the wider recognition of a 'specialist' composer. One of the report's most important conclusions is that 'the need for a larger programme for recording the best of the contemporary repertoire and for an aural archive of British music is urgent'. The importance of the BBC to the 'specialist' composer cannot be overestimated, for its resources can ensure that good performances are widely heard.

Throughout the report, Rump emphasises the necessity for a continuing programme of education and involvement in the concerns of 'specialist'

contemporary music. Again the BBC is central to this purpose:

A B.B.C. which felt a strong responsibility to broaden and deepen its audience's musical experience could lead that audience to new music through more explanatory programmes and through much more sensitive programming.

Rump suggests that lack of education accounts for much of the reluctance to listen to new music. Referring to the education of musicians, he points out that composition of the non-pastiche kind can sometimes be taken as a degree-course option, though he admits that the consequent stimulation of interest can result in a greater number of composers applying for the few grants available for further compositional study. He could have made the point that courses of higher education in music would serve the interests of the contemporary composer more effectively if they emphasised the critical study of the attitudes and language found in contemporary music. This lack in some institutions should be cause for concern, since it is possible for students, even at this level, to finish their study still thinking that tonally based music is the norm, from which other types are some sort of aberration—an attitude they then perpetuate in their own pupils. Rump strongly affirms that an important benefit of any composer-in-residence scheme is found in the educational experience it offers those who come into contact with the composer involved.

While Rump presses for the firmer support of contemporary music that would result from increased government funding, he makes it clear that he is against any assumption by the state of total responsibility for either the income of individual composers or for the transmission of their work. He argues that the inevitable consequence of such state participation would be increased centralisation of control within the art, with too great a reliance upon decisions (and therefore the judgment and taste) of functionaries whom Rump labels 'taste-makers': 'if we are to avoid the slavery Lenin and his heirs created, then we must make sure that the money-bags are many and their dispensers are various'. Rump expresses the view that the maintenance of a composer's integrity necessitates that he remain 'privatised', operating in the market place with the help of potential allies whom Rump calls 'decision-makers'—the producers, propagators, and consumers of the composer's work material. However, the distinction Rump seeks to draw by the use of these two terms is indeed tenuous, for although he clearly envisages the taste-maker's role as restrictive, his study fails to demonstrate that the operations of decision-makers are actually less confining: publishing and record making (areas instanced as being especially responsive to free market forces) allow the decision-maker/consumer the freedom to purchase only that which the decision-maker/vendor has seen fit to provide. The decision-maker/vendor is nothing other than a taste-maker, since the heavy costs of producing musical material ensure that the decisive factor is the potential market—a restriction whose effect may be seen in the fairly predictable nature of the output from several established publishing houses. With this in mind Rump's hope that 'In the very long run, the intensity of use to which a composer's works are put by the generality of music lovers should be the arbiter of his reward' rings somewhat hollow. In any case the time-scale necessary to achieve such a state should be gauged against Rump's estimate that at present 'some small part of one per cent of consumer spending on serious music reaches the pockets of living composers'.

Dr Rump's study makes gloomy reading. The state

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has failed in its duty to provide an adequate system of copyright law, the financial consequences of which are to force the composer into greater dependence on government funding, direct and indirect. The present level of music education fails to stimulate the consumer: when many listeners can satisfy their needs through the works of past composers, and do so in preference to works by living composers, it is too easy for much contemporary music to be thought of as a wasteful luxury. There is no doubt that this report will make a significant contribution to any future assessment of the place of music and the contemporary composer in our society. The question is whether such an investigation in years to come will consider Dr Rump's findings as being in the mould of Charles Dickens or Thomas Moore: it would be a sad indictment of our society's attitude to its composers were the present Bleakness to be seen in retrospect as Utopian.

¹ Alan Rump, *Money for Composers* (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1977) [available from the Arts Council, at the address given at the head of this review].

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