

## EDITORIAL: TOO MUCH NOISE?

Christopher Fox

On 16 November 2017 I received an email from Gaudeamus announcing the nomination of six ‘Young Music Pioneers’ for the 2018 Gaudeamus Award. To qualify for the award composers had to be under the age of 30 and the final six had been selected by an international jury who had looked at ‘336 scores from 43 different countries’. So far so unremarkable: Gaudeamus has been awarding this honour since 1957. What was remarkable was that all six Pioneers were men, two from north America, four from countries of the European Union.

There was a flurry of activity on social media, mostly centred around questions of gender representation but also ethnic and cultural diversity. Gaudeamus responded, pointing out that their other promotions, especially the Gaudeamus Music Week, include many women musicians as performers and composers, as well as musicians from a wide range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. They also described the process by which the Young Pioneers were chosen: all the submitted scores were anonymised and the jury (two men, one woman) read all the scores independently before comparing their assessments. This is a familiar process from many competitions and it is often described, as Gaudeamus described it, as ‘objective’.

Certainly it’s a process that owes something to ideas of objectivity in other areas of life and as a means of preserving the status quo, and doing so with as little prejudice as possible, it works well. In a subsequent email exchange between *TEMPO* and Gaudeamus, however, they also explained that of the 336 scores submitted for the Young Pioneers, only about 20 per cent were by women. So, had the selection process been representative rather than ‘objective’, one would have expected at least one woman composer to have been selected. That’s not the point, however. If you want contemporary musical activity to be like the world, and not just a boys’ club, then it is not a good idea to begin with a 20:80 gender divide.

Anonymity is probably not a good idea either. If selection is based on notated scores then it is surely useful to know that Score A, which seems not to be part of musical discourses familiar to Jury Member X, is by a composer whose background is quite different. Knowing more about what one is trying to assess makes decisions more complicated, but to choose not to try and find out more is itself a sort of tacit prejudice. Composition competition jury members will often claim that they don’t need explicit criteria to guide their selection because they always recognise quality when they find it, but how then do they recognise a different sort of quality, one that they don’t already know?

It’s important to emphasise that this is not a problem particular to Gaudeamus, nor is it just to do with the way particular sorts of selection process discriminate in favour of the familiar. More important is to ask why men are four times more likely than women to submit a score to a composition competition, more likely to study for a post-graduate qualification in composition, more likely to submit articles

about new music to *TEMPO* and, when they do, more likely to write about male composers. I think this has a lot to do with old-fashioned ideas about masculinity. Ostentatious male display has a long history, as evident in musical life as in any other field of human activity, and, although I don't subscribe to the more simplistic analogies between musical forms and gender and sexuality offered by some New Musicologists, there is a particular way of inhabiting musical space and time that does seem to carry at least some connotations of aggressively mannish behaviour.

Entering competitions is perhaps part of this – they are above all a way of attracting attention, a way of initiating the mating ritual with promoters, making the sort of noise that will get you noticed – and for as long as I've been active in new music this has been the way things have worked. History tells us that things worked like this in earlier eras too. Composers aggressively adopt a 'new' aesthetic, find a new 'edge' with which to do some cutting, denounce other musicians, play louder, quieter, higher, lower, cheaper, more expensively than anyone else: all ways to make a noise and demand attention. But history also tells us that only some of the music that we want to hear was produced like this, so perhaps it's time to experiment with making less noise.

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Were one to look for a composer who has chosen not to make a lot of noise, Howard Skempton might be rather a good example. I first got to know his subtly understated music in 1976 when I bought a copy of the *Keyboard Anthology* published by the Experimental Music Catalogue (EMC) and discovered that most of the pieces which I could play were by Skempton and that these pieces also seemed to be the most strikingly individual pieces in the collection. Four decades later I haven't changed my mind and in the intervening years it has been a delight not only to get to know Howard personally but also to continue being surprised by the inventiveness of his musical imagination. In those 40 years Howard's work has also become known to a much wider public, yet has received rather less analytical and critical than the music of some of his noisier contemporaries. Arnold Whittall's article in this issue goes some way to redressing the balance and one of the pieces to be the subject of his analytical gaze is 'First Prelude', the final work in that EMC anthology.

A birthday seemed like an opportunity for celebration and so I have invited a number of composers to present Howard with a small musical tribute. These gifts are scattered through this issue and include music by two composers who have also regularly performed Howard's work (Michael Finnissy and James Weeks), two composers for whom that work has been a significant influence (Laurence Crane and Linda C. Smith), a composer who studied with Howard (Genevieve Murphy), and a fellow accordionist-composer (Claudia Molitor). Documentation of Genevieve Murphy's creative process also provides this issue's artwork. *TEMPO* is very grateful to all six composers for their generosity.