REPORT FROM NEW YORK: First Annual Conference of the American Society of University Composers

Arthur Daniels

BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION TO THE REPORT ON THE FIRST Annual Conference of the American Society of University Composers (ASUC), held in New York City on April 1–3, 1966, let me explain that the formation of the Society was announced in the Fall-Winter 1965 issue of *Perspectives of New Music*, with sixty-three composers listed as founding members. On the aims and principles of the Society, I quote from the *Perspectives* announcement:

> The chief assumption of the Society is that the university is an appropriate place to pursue serious composition and the whole range of professional activity necessary to it. We have found that an environment where music is regarded as entertainment, where professional standards are set by non professionals, and where writing about music is dominated by a belief in amateurism, is inadequate to our professional requirements. We have also found that the university, with its tradition of respect for serious intellectual activity, professionally established standards, and rational discourse, can be more than a convenient economic haven for composers; it is at present, for better or worse, the American institution best suited to the development of an adequate environment for our profession.
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> The actions of the Society will fall into three major areas:
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> 1. The establishment of both general and curricular standards for the wide range of subject matter relevant to the compositional discipline.
> 2. The establishment among university composers of a collective means of representing their interests, both within the academic community and to the intellectual and political communities at large.
> 3. The improvement of communication within the profession: the development of means for disseminating essential professional information through performance, publication, and the provision of regular opportunities for professional dialogue.

In its original announcement ASUC invited application for membership in two categories: General Membership—open to qualified

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professionals teaching in American colleges, universities, and schools of music; and Student Membership—open to graduate students in composition. In the course of the Conference it was made clear that any composer, who at any time in his life was associated with a college, university, or conservatory, is eligible for membership. Thus, two of the founding members have at present no academic affiliation: Grant Beglarian, the Director of the Contemporary Music Project of the Music Educators National Conference; and Ernst Krenek, listed simply as a resident of Tujunga, California. As evidence of the need for and interest in an organization of this kind, the original list of sixty-three founding members was more than doubled in the few weeks which elapsed between the mailing of this issue of *Perspectives* and the opening of the meeting.

The Conference, presented with the co-operation of the music departments of Columbia and New York Universities, consisted, on the one hand, of a series of seminars (lectures, panel discussions, and organizational meetings) held at the Loeb Student Center of New York University, and, on the other, of two concert-demonstrations by new music performance groups (resident at Rutgers University, Columbia University, the University of Pennsylvania, and the State University of New York at Buffalo) presented in McMillin Academic Theatre of Columbia University. Space limitations do not permit more than a brief but enthusiastic gesture of appreciation for the high standards set by these performance groups. My discussion of the organizational meeting must be limited to the simple statement that committees have been established to set up effective machinery necessary for the three major areas detailed above.

It is clear from the Society's statement of its aims and principles, quoted in part above, that much of its energy will be directed toward the betterment of the material circumstances of its membership. It is equally apparent that this same statement scathingly indicts the academic environment in which most American university composers presently operate. Therefore (since the contents of the seminars will be published in amplified form as part of the Society's *Proceedings*) my discussion of the seminars will stress those comments by the various speakers which indicate specific areas of dissatisfaction with this environment.

The topics of the four meetings were as follows: (1) The University and the Composing Profession: Prospects and Problems; (2) Computer Performance of Music; (3) Discoveries and Problems in a

Study of Berg's *Wozzeck*; (4) What do you want a student to hear in a piece of music?

Mr. Iain Hamilton (Duke University), the conference's first speaker, contrasted the position of the composer in his native England with that of his American counterpart. Whereas the European composer is a professional and seldom affiliated with universities, the American composer finds that his colleagues on campus are no longer true professionals. "They pursue lives in music of a kind of dreamlike fantasy, a situation supported by no little amount of shady politics." The composer has a responsibility to his students to inquire into the teaching of his colleagues, especially when he inherits their badly-prepared students. Mr. Hamilton urged the composer to teach occasional courses to the general student body. He decried the low level at which music history, in effect, music appreciation courses, are taught and asked whether a college physics department would offer a course in "physics appreciation." "Why should introduction to music courses be given as if the students were children?" He warned the composer against being swamped in departmental matters and service on committees and closed with the observation that universities are just about as antithetical to creative work as any institution can be.

Mr. Andrew Imbrie (University of California, Berkeley) reported on the progress of a project, initiated in 1961, to publish new music through the University of California Press. Scores and parts are to be issued as part of the University's series publication, with free distribution to university music libraries throughout the country under an arrangement already established for scholarly monographs. The rental of orchestral materials will be handled by the music library at Berkeley, which will also aid with limited mailings of advertising material for the series. Since the regulations on series publication stipulate that only material by faculty and students of the university may be published, Mr. Imbrie frankly raised the question of parochialism. He was quick to add that if other similar series originate around the country, this problem may disappear, especially if resources are pooled, particularly in the areas of promotion and distribution. He suggested the eventual establishment of a central office, supported by a confederation of universities or by the ASUC itself. Three works thus far have been approved for publication: a string quartet by Arnold Elston, now ready for publication; a cantata by Seymour Shifrin to the text of Sophoclean choruses; and David Lewin's *Classical Variations on a Theme of Schönberg* for 'cello and piano.

Mr. Beglarian urged the Society to be more than a union working for the improvement of the composer's lot on campus. The Society should attempt to convert the campus to an operational base, affecting not only the campus itself but also the surrounding area and the country as a whole. He identified the large university-connected school of music as the type of institution "which, for better or worse, shapes the present and future of our musical life." He characterized as having abandoned music to the Philistines in the outside world those departments (a few in the East and some not so old in the West) which have omitted music performance altogether from their curricula, while producing historians, theorists, and composers whose training in a classical university can be justified in terms easily understood by Greek scholars, doctors of jurisprudence, and college presidents. On the other hand, he said, the university schools of music turn out armies of public school teachers, tuba players with doctorates, notational problem solvers (musicologists?) with Ph.D.'s, and theory teachers who compose now and then. He contended that a composer on campus should be valued more for his ability as a composer than as a teacher and that the university must allow violin playing to be equated with surgery and composition with research if it is to be regarded as a cultural center.

Mr. Charles Wuorinen (Columbia University), speaking from his experience as co-director of the Group for Contemporary Music, pointed out that in urban areas the university composer enjoys few performances of his works, and these are generally far from adequate. The composer working in the university school of music, which may be dominated by a non-compositional approach to performance, suffers similarly. Thus, the formation of the Columbia group (and similar organizations at Rutgers University, University of Pennsylvania, University of Chicago, and the State University at Buffalo) has originated from the composer's desire to take a direct hand in the making of his own music and that of his colleagues. The same impulse, perhaps, has led to the recent interest in electronic music, that is, not so much a desire for new sounds as the notion that the composer may thereby exercise a higher degree of control over his compositional intent than if he entrusts his work to lazy, indifferent, or hostile performers. The activities of these groups operating in academic institutions (and in departments of the type disparaged by Mr. Beglarian, I might add) has resulted in the raising of performance standards in the professional concert world and the creation of a whole new breed of composer-performers.

Many problems, chiefly financial, confront groups of this kind. University administrations must be persuaded to pay for the performance of new music on campus. There is also, and surprisingly, the problem of overfinancing. Large foundations and the Federal Government must be persuaded to consult with professionals, those who set standards, before glutting the market with funds. An attempt should be made to expand the present scope of these groups to include the small orchestra and ultimately the orchestral and operatic media as well. Mr. Wuorinen believes that the orchestral situation in the public world will get worse instead of better, and the composer must either abandon the large orchestra or convince university administrations to support orchestras on campus devoted to the performance of new music. He urged the ASUC to see to it that performance groups in this country operate in less isolated fashion than now through the publicizing of the various groups' activities and through the distribution of tape recordings.

Three of the four speakers in the session on "Computer Performance of Music," Messrs. Ercolino Ferretti (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), Godfrey Winham (Princeton University), and James Tenney (Yale University), concerned themselves chiefly with descriptions of the computer equipment used by them to produce the brief musical examples which they presented. Mr. Herbert Brün (University of Illinois), the session's first speaker, did this and much more. After explaining that his paper was "meant to describe one point of view, seen from which a composer will want the best possible computer system to assist him, be that expedient or not," he launched into an explication of the creative process, expressed in information theory terms, so tautly-organized that it would be both vain and unfair to attempt a synopsis here.

In the panel discussion which followed the four lectures, Mr. Martino noted the lack of variety in attack characteristics in the examples played and asked whether this was due to limitations in the capabilities of the machines producing the sounds or in the men operating the machines. The speakers promptly exonerated the machines. Messrs. Brün and Lejaren Hiller (University of Illinois) explained that they are now engaged in research on the transients of sound on, for example, the inharmonic partials which are present in a particularly sharp trumpet attack.

Mr. Harold Shapero (Brandeis University) asked Mr. Brün (1) whether he equated artistic invention with the reduction of chaos through the ordering of information, and (2) why it is that music

seemed richer when it was an art and a craft and not a branch of acoustical research and analysis. He concluded by asking whether this could have anything to do with the confusion of the quantitative with the qualitative. Mr. Brün replied to the first question that he does not make such an equation. What he does equate, he said, is artistic invention with the desire for a new system which could be ordered because it happens to be in chaos, for the reason that only a selection which has not been made before can have any meaning. During the discussion of the second question, Mr. Shapero deplored the excessive emphasis on quantification which is responsible for much of the boredom and lack of variety in the artistic products and announced that it is time for the scientific mentality to be buttressed by the qualitative mentality. Mr. Brün agreed but maintained that the systems which listen are not entirely compatible to the systems which produce. Mr. Shapero objected that Mr. Brün was asking for a special ear, free of prejudice and that he was not entitled to it. He maintained that all music, even "the artistic product coming from the analysis of sound," must be listened to and judged by artistic criteria. Mr. Brün replied that artistic criteria are contextually defined and that they cannot be considered an ultimate standard. He defended his right to produce in front of an audience any kind of acoustical organization that he regards as meaningful and concluded that if he had to make a choice between artistic criteria and music, he would choose the latter.

The salient feature of the final seminar was the universal dissatisfaction with the products of our public school music programs, expressed by panel participants and speakers from the floor, including some representing the most prestigious music departments in the country. Perhaps the answer to Mr. Hamilton's rhetorical question—Why should introduction to music courses be given as if the students were children—is "Because, musically speaking, they *are* children." If one compares the serious study of mathematics and science, beginning with the earliest years of grade school, which prepare the student for work in physics at the college level (to return to the analogy drawn earlier by Mr. Hamilton) with the dreadful emptiness of most public school music programs, with their barbaric emphasis on football marching bands and Christmas caroling for the PTA, then it is no wonder that music students reach college with undeveloped, if not hopelessly perverted, minds, ears, and appetites.

If this new Society can extend its involvement with curricular matters to include university public school music programs, then it