

## EDITORIAL: WHO CARES WHAT COMPOSERS THINK?

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Some issues of *TEMPO* quickly coalesce around a particular topic, often one proposed as a symposium on that subject, such as the articles on Thomas Adès that Edward Venn gathered in the previous issue or Cat Hope's curation of articles that focused on issues of gender representation. Other issues take shape more gradually, sometimes tagged in the editorial schedule as 'the one in which that article is going to appear'. This is one of those and the article in question is by Kevin Volans.

Volans is a composer whose work reached a wide audience in 1987 when the Kronos Quartet included two movements from his *White Man Sleeps* string quartet on their eponymous album. In 1992 their *Pieces of Africa* album presented all five movements of *White Man Sleeps* and Volans' music became inextricably linked to the then booming 'world music' fashion. As Volans acknowledges in his new article, a number of the works he wrote in the 1980s, including *White Man Sleeps*, originated in transcriptions of music from southern Africa, where he was born and grew up, but by the 1990s he had moved beyond transcription, abstracting formal principles he had discovered in southern African music within his new work. As is often the case, however, critical reception of Volans' music trailed quite some way behind its composer's aesthetic development, and it was only in the mid-1990s, most notably with Timothy D. Taylor's article 'When We Think about Music and Politics: The Case of Kevin Volans',<sup>1</sup> that musicologists began to worry away at the implications of Volans, a white South African, making music out of elements of the music of black musicians in southern Africa.

Volans explains his own reaction to this scholarly attention in his article, eloquently articulating his sense of being misunderstood or, at best, being no more than very partially understood, and readers can draw their own conclusions from the case he makes. But there are wider questions here too, some of which Volans raises at the end of his article. 'Composers', he suggests, 'are excluded from the discussion of their work.' Is this really true? This issue of *TEMPO* considers the work of a number of composers and does so along a continuum that runs from Anna Höstman's interview with Keiko Devaux – the composer representing herself in response to a series of informed questions – to Noah Kahrs' forensic analysis of a recurrent rhythmic figure in the music of Hans Abrahamsen – the composer's work interrogated in his absence, but again from a thoroughly informed perspective.

Kevin Volans also asserts that 'musicology is addressed only to musicologists'. Perhaps this is so, but musicology is, after all, a

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy D. Taylor 'When We Think about Music and Politics: The Case of Kevin Volans', *Perspectives of New Music*, 33, no. 1/2 (Winter–Summer, 1995), pp. 504–36.

discipline in its own right, with its own preoccupations. Sometimes it can seem to performing and composing musicians that their musicological colleagues are ignoring the sounding domain, the realm in which musical practice takes place, in favour of more theoretical considerations – social, structural, political – but this is a fashion that, like most, will probably pass. Like Volans, however, I do find it frustrating that relatively few scholars want to write the sort of musicology that *TEMPO* publishes; scrutiny of the biographies at the back of each issue of the journal reveals that many of the authors of our articles and reviews lead a double life as both musicologists and either composers or performers and, as I know from years of experience, run the risk of not being taken seriously in either of the disciplines they practise.

For those of us who do want to write about new music, the question in the title of this editorial poses a recurring dilemma. How much weight should one give to what composers have to say about their work? If one is given access to sketches, for example, to what extent should one allow them to affect one's understanding of the work that was eventually made public? After all, as every composer knows, it's all too easy for the promising potential of a set of sketches to be lost somewhere along the creative path. Perhaps this train of thought should be taken a little further: at what point in writing about a musician's work is it legitimate to criticise their project or, as in the example that triggered Volans' article, to propose a critical reading of that project that contradicts the musician's own view of it? Quite early in my time as *TEMPO*'s editor I received an email from a promoter questioning whether the new-music 'community' was sufficiently resilient to be able to sustain the critical onslaught of one of our writers. It remains a concern: what sort of balance should the journal strike between advocacy and critique?

One final thought: previous editorials have often ended with a series of brief tributes to musicians and writers who have recently died. Usually these have been tributes to people with a particularly close association with *TEMPO*, but in the months since the last issue was published we have lost so many significant figures in new music, almost an entire alphabet, from Louis Andriessen to Hugh Wood, and this has led me to think again about who is remembered in these editorials. So I want to draw attention to just one, the visionary Canadian composer R. Murray Schafer. Schafer's work was extraordinarily ambitious, ranging from the composition of works for the concert hall and site-specific works to be performed in a variety of landscapes, the creation of educational programmes to challenge the way students thought about sound and music, and, through the World Soundscape Project, to the audio documentation of the world itself. Outside Canada it is the Soundscape Project that has become best known, both through Schafer's own endeavours and those of his colleagues, such as Hildegard Westerkamp and Barry Truax. The works of Keiko Devaux, Claudia Molitor and Kevin Volans featured in this issue of *TEMPO* all attest to Schafer's influence.