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Call for Scores: Piano Duets from Hawaii to Holland

a grassroots initiative to introduce pianists to new music of living composers

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ABSTRACT

The prejudice of amateur (and even professional) pianists against playing new music of living composers is evident in the growing number of piano clubs whose members study the more familiar music of dead composers to play for each other. Conservatories regularly output pianists well-versed in the repertoire of yesteryear with only a minority embracing music not yet written. Pianists tend towards solos rather than duets and more collaborative playing. These observations motivated the lead author to send a “Call for Scores” to composers to submit piano duets for members of a piano club in San Francisco to sightread. Some 42 compositions from 30 composers were accepted over a three month period. The original format of a sightreading competition had to be revamped when it emerged that pianists refused to be judged by their sightreading ability. Instead of “competition” the event was changed into a “sightreading workshop and piano soiree.” Furthermore, the pianists were resistant to sightreading music in front of their creators. Thus the composers were not invited to the event, except for one whose work was being studied to be performed and another who missed the deadline. Despite the specific instruction that the Call for Scores was intended for works to be sightread, more than 75% of the accepted works were too difficult to play by the average sightreader. Several findings emerged from this project. Readability is key to playability. Trying out new music is risky. Pianists lower the risk of playing badly by choosing scores that look final, published, and validated. Few pianists dare try music they have never heard or seen before. Sightreading and playing level of collaborators have to be relatively close to increase the enjoyability level. Several unexpected benefits resulted from this international project which spanned the course of a year, from Hawaii to Holland and

back. One major contribution of this project is shortening the time to publish and disseminate, i.e. from composer to performer to the final audience. With sufficient feedback and iteration between composer and performer, it is hoped that the longevity of such new works will be better secured.

The main purpose of this paper is to share insights from a grassroots, self-funded initiative using the “call for scores” method to invite composers to submit interesting music (scores) for many hands on one piano. The author wanted to share the joy of sightreading to discover new music with other pianists in her travels from Hawaii to Holland and back in 2011. The project took the course of a year, from announcement of the call for scores on blog and several composition websites in January 2011 to several iterations of score interpretation, performance, recording, review (on blog), and final feedback via e-mails. 42 works were accepted from 30 composers and interpreted by pianists in Maui, San Francisco, Utrecht, and the Hague. After sightreading them with a pianist in Maui, 25 were chosen to be "sightreadable" and "interesting to play" for the soiree in San Francisco. 14 of these 25 were recorded and reviewed in the Concertblog.

Some of the findings were as follows:

- 1- Most pianists don't like to sightread. The idea of a competition where composers and other pianists are present doesn't work. We turned the event into a sightreading soiree and workshop instead of a competition.
- 2- Many pianists don't like to play new music they've never heard of before.
- 3- It took a lot of effort to find pianists that are willing to 1) sightread AND 2) try new music.
- 4- It took even more effort and luck to find pianists willing to study and record the music. The first pianist Brendan Kinsella - not much studying - mainly one or two rounds together. The second Carol Ruiz Gandia- we studied the pieces individually and then recorded them.
- 5- The push to get the music recorded was largely due to having the piano, recording facility available in Utrecht.

- 6- This project was not funded. It was experimental. I had this idea to introduce new music to pianists. Progress was slow, much hindered by finding pockets of time between my travels, moving house - from Holland to Hawaii, starting a new life here.

Call for scores

Call for scores in music is an activity similar to call for submissions in literature and call for entries in the (visual) arts.

Anyone can put out a “Call for Scores” announcement, inviting composers to submit their works to be considered for premiere performance, competition, recording, and publication. Performers (soloists, ensembles, and orchestras), competitions, music festivals, universities and conservatories, music societies and associations use this approach to channel a variety of music from many living composers to living interpreters. It is a form of publicity and feedback for composers and their work. Through this process, new works and new composers are discovered.

In such announcements, specifics of the music are stipulated: genre, duration, instrumentation, and difficulty level. Other details include submission deadlines, restrictions on whether it has been published or previously performed or recorded, restrictions on age and nationality and gender, typesetting and layout of the score, anonymity or description of the work. Rewards could vary from premiere of the selected work to monetary compensation and recognition. Some “Call for Scores” are highly prestigious, a validation of a composer’s work and a boost to his/her career.

The Internet and search engines have made it so much easier for wide dissemination of such announcements, be it through e-mails, newsletters, or websites. Search for “call for scores” and you get 61 pages of Google results. On the other hand, “call for pianists” resulted in considerably fewer pages. While this seems to suggest more demand for music

to suit a specific performer or group of performers than vice versa, it does not mean that pianists are queuing up to play new music.

Sightreading

Unlike reading words and understanding text, reading music notes does not automatically result in playing the right keys. Sightreading, sight-reading, or sight reading, also known as prima vista playing, refers to the ability to play at first sight. Sightreaders are not born but bred. It takes experience to get good at it. Generally, the more you attempt at sightreading, the better you get.

The ability to sightread allows one to quickly judge different aspects of a piece of music: level of technical difficulty, enjoyability, and estimate of effort required to study the piece to performance standard. A good way to gauge one's sightreading ability is put oneself in a situation where one must play at the right tempo, such as accompanying a choir, playing a duet, or playing in an ensemble or orchestra. When one plays solo works, one has the tendency (and freedom) to slow down to one's comfort zone.

The true test of one's sightreading ability is to put sheet music that has never been seen or heard before in front of the interpreter. That is music that has not been published, publicized, found, or known. Music that has not been written falls into this category.

The rest of this paper discusses piano duets and their role in improving sightreading ability, music of living composers, the life cycle of a piece of work, amateur vs professional pianists, performers vs non-performers, and future steps.

Examples of call for scores

Alienor Harpsichord Competition for amateur players

<http://www.harpsichord-now.org/>

Piano Pinnacle Call for Scores 2011 (Piano Duo Works)

<http://www.bccreativehub.com/?p=859>

The Composer's Site

<http://www.composerssite.com/content/piano-repertoire-project---call-scores>

<http://call4scores.blogspot.com/>

Women in Music

<http://www.womeninmusic.org.uk/compsandops.asp>

Muziekcentrum Nederland

<http://www.muziekcentrumnederland.nl/hedendaags/internationaleconcoursen/compositiecompetities/>

European Composers Forum

<http://www.composersforum.eu/?p=243>

<http://www.composersforum.eu/?cat=6>

Composition Today (magazine)

<http://www.compositiontoday.com/opportunities/view.asp>

Iowa Composers Forum

<http://www.iowacomposers.org/index.php>

Contemporary Music Centre, Ireland

<http://www.cmc.ie/opportunities/calls.html>

Colchester New Music

<http://colchesternewmusic.com/2011/07/03/primavera-call-for-scores/>

New Music Ensemble, Bowling Green State

<http://www.bgsu.edu/colleges/music/events/page101514.html>

American Composers Forum

<http://www.composersforum.org/get-involved/events/luna-nova-music-call-scores>

Orchestra of Our Time

<http://orchestraofourtime.org/wordpress/call-for-scores>

New England Conservatory

<http://orchestraofourtime.org/wordpress/call-for-scores>

Composers Association of New Zealand

<http://canz.net.nz/noticeboard/?cat=10&paged=2>

Other call for scores may be obtained from composition competitions, festivals, forums, societies, conservatories, universities, and associations. Performers (soloists, ensembles, orchestras) also call for scores on their website.

References

Chronology of this project

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