

EMBRACING

All music was once new music. But how many of us regularly fold “new notes” into our performing and our teaching?

In the 21st century, new music comes to us daily, whole cloth and in snippets, from many directions. As listeners, we encounter it setting the scene or defining a character or emotion in films and on TV and as an essential partner to rap and dance. Music in these contexts speaks to us using many vocabularies of sounds from the major, minor and Lydian of TV commercials to John Corigliano’s 12-tone score for *Altered States*, and beyond to complexes of structured noise. In such encounters we rarely consider the music itself problematic. So if the *sounds* in themselves are not at issue, something else must be at work to suggest that new sounds equate to “forbidding” ones: the circumstances of *how* and *where* we meet those sounds.

When the music is in score form, unadorned on the page, spontaneous barriers to easy acquaintanceship seem to pop up. We find ourselves asking the question “Should I...?” Should I devote time and attention to this piece, polishing it to performance level? Can I do it justice? Does it fit who I am as an artist? Should I introduce it to students? As teachers, we ask that a new composition pass hurdles of acceptance before being assigned as a repertoire piece when we wouldn’t think twice about assigning another Clementi sonatina or another Chopin nocturne. Why?

In music whose idioms we know well, we navigate with artistic comfort. But in other idioms we are less certain—perhaps less certain both of the music’s intrinsic quality, and of its suitability to sustain the long acquaintanceship inherent in practicing it to performance level. It’s true that this music hasn’t yet achieved *brand name status*. But turn that around and realize that *we* are the ones who

have the power to bestow that “branding” on the newest notes being created in our time! With such realization comes empowerment and exhilaration and, hopefully, a heightened curiosity concerning the music.

It’s time to probe into the issues. Uncertainty and questions about quality fall away once we get comfortable with all that surrounds and colors the experience of a new-music encounter. Using the composer’s-eye-view, I’ll clarify both the teacher’s and student’s perspectives, clearing away vestiges of any negative mystique and promote confidence in the practice of selectively *adding new works*, on a regular basis. The focus is on newer music meant for *repertoire*, not pedagogical works.

Looking Back

In eras past, new music was attractive on its own merits, beckoning audiences who were ready to hear. In the centuries before recordings, devoted listeners would gather specifically to hear the newest compositions of their times—Chopin played by Chopin; the newest Liszt performed by Liszt. Clara Wieck Schumann programmed the music of her husband, Robert, and Johannes Brahms, music contemporary to her written by composers she knew well and believed in. Wagner produced Wagner, Mahler conducted Mahler, Skriabin played Skriabin. Cécile Chaminade and Amy Beach were lionized by adoring fan clubs on both sides of the Atlantic—as composers and as pianists. Stravinsky (sometimes) conducted Stravinsky, and Horowitz regularly played Rachmaninoff and Barber, composers whose styles he knew well.

What has changed over the last 70 to 100 years? **Monumental wars** have torn apart accepted social, cultural and political contexts, leaving havoc, psychic and physical scars and uncertainty in their wake. It’s natural that responses to such horrors are mirrored in the arts, where they are expressed in heightened form. And it’s also natural that enlightened hindsight very often leads to questioning everything about the previous world order. From these upheavals come two almost parallel imperatives: to discover

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NEW MUSIC

By Judith Lang Zaimont

new forms of expression for the new era by making a noticeable break with the past, purposefully jettisoning past artistic models, existing genres and older frames and also to return to works of bygone eras for their solace and resonating connection to past “good” times.

Advances in technology have gifted us with a durable legacy of sound recordings encompassing not just our own era, our culture and our international stars of performance, but stretching outward and back to include music of many other historical and current cultures, plus additionally preserving the artistry of performers of the recent past. Continuing advances in the dissemination of recorded sounds encourage us to at least sample many kinds of music, setting aside taste-making decisions as we accent the explorative mode.

“Telephone,” distance also brings with it unavoidable distortion and misunderstanding, affecting the performance and teaching of a particular *idiomatic* style of delivery, one that respects the music’s subtle and individual emphases.

In the 1920s George Antheil, dubbed the “Bad Boy of American Music,” made his career by going to Europe as a young man and playing only his own music, simultaneously introducing his works and himself as pianist in a single artistic package. After this point, though, things began to change. The succeeding decades worked to favor a classical musician’s *single* title. Schnabel rarely, if ever, played Schnabel; do we even remember that Wanda Landowska wrote music? Leonard Bernstein’s ongoing problem with equal public recognition for both his major contributions as composer and as conductor is emblematic of the mid- and late-century situation.

Nervous and chattery, like irregular typing or the patter of rain, *molto secco*.
1 sec. — ♩ = M.M. 60

4 sec. *pp*

a tempo (interrupting; an out-cry)
sub.
ff

Opening section of “The Computer’s Revenge” (Scherzo) from *The Machine Age* by William Albright, a commission from Friends of Today’s Music, MTAC. (Copyright 1991 by Henmar Press Inc./C. F. Peters.)

All music-makers became permanently **compartmented** by hard separations into the **specialty areas** of “performer,” “composer,” “scholar.” As a result, increased distance arose between creator and renderer and with that distance, all issues involved in understanding a composer’s individual idiom became amplified. Just as in the child’s game of

Looking Around

Our outlook as teachers is artistic, yet also analytic and practical. As pianists we “own” an enviable and living legacy of truly great music. Along with strings and winds we possess a repertoire going back centuries, and there is sustaining joy when we introduce these works to students for the first time. Great and time-tested music remains truly “ever new.” By contrast, winds, brass and percussion instruments and their quintessential repertoire really come into their own, in the mid-20th century, partly because of the rise of jazz, partly due to radio’s need for instruments that would project well from a tiny box via questionable fidelity, and for other reasons.

Dubbed “The Age of the Piano,” the 19th century was perhaps the piano’s prime time. Most parlors had the instrument as focal point, and the piano participated in every musical function, ranging from partnering a hymn or parlor song to center spotlight as a full-fledged “pocket orchestra.” From that century come legacies of chordal layout, registral contrasts and technical spotlights—repeated pitches, trills, glissandi, large chunk chords, extreme range doublings and other innovations that still well serve the 21st century composer.



Opening of Carter Pann's *Soirée Macabre* enhances resonance through registral contrast (mm 1–10). A commission for Nicola Melville's TransAmerican project. Copyright 2007.

We see this legacy readily in the “new” music our students easily adopt: arrangements of folk tunes; music for worship, hymn- or pop-based; numbers from stage musicals or movies in arrangements at a suitable technical level; similar arrangements of rock or pop hits. Why then the hesitation with new *concert* music? The likeliest reasons can be summarized as two all-too-common equations, each conjuring imaginary, yet major, roadblocks:

1: “New” = *Hard*: because it’s hard to understand. (“I can’t hear it in my head.”)

2: “New” = *Awkward* to play, or unidiomatic.

As for *being hard*: If music is in any way a language, it has both a unique *vocabulary* and a distinct *grammar*. As I see it, the problems are not with pitch arrays or odd meters (the *vocabulary*), but with the *grammar*: phrase structures that don’t rhyme, cross-rhythmic lines of some complexity, perceptible absence of a felt beat, connections made via jump-cut rather than coordinating phrases in *segue* and so forth.

Composer’s idioms are like dialects. For the music to parse naturally, the performer has to be acquainted with that dialect’s special locutions, nuances and flavors. Only then will the music flow as was intended, with the requested emphases innate to that composer’s “speech pattern.” Once we become comfortable with a composer’s particular manner of locution, we may well discover it to be a dialect we *like*.

Frequently, we try the theorist’s approach to new music. “If I track each pitch-set through all its permutations, I’ll know the piece.” No! What makes new music *live* are the same things that make any work of musical art live: rhythm and pitch working together meaningfully as sound events in real time—and it should also *feel right* to play. Often, the new music that comes forward in method books is more a watered-down illustration of a principle than a living piece. Those “think examples” are fine as illustrations, or to introduce vocabulary building blocks, but they shouldn’t be the only ones our students get to experience.

And as for being *awkward*: We grant considerable leeway to composers with whom we are familiar, whose later works may well branch out experimentally in language and format far beyond the features of their earlier compositions—Beethoven is a prime example. Over time, some of those later experiments become the new playing standard. Just because a particular passage is awkward when sight reading needn’t mean it will remain so after practice; as example, think of any *étude*.

Importantly, too, composers of the current generation who are pianists themselves may on occasion *knowingly* push technique to its limits, even as they make a point much of the time to write idiomatically. So we come full circle, from Chopin playing Chopin, through Rachmaninoff playing Rachmaninoff, to Muczynski playing Muczynski and Zaimont playing Zaimont.

Try an experiment, using a well-known original as a stepping stone to compose a “new piece”: working together with your student, select a two-voice movement from the *Anna Magdalena Bach Notebook*. Keep the rhythms intact but substitute pitches from a 10-note collection and use these as the materials from which a new piece will grow.

Freely vary the new pitch glossary:

- Change/invert the order of pitches
- Repeat notes as the student wishes
- Slow down/speed up the tempo—experiment!

Once the composing phase is done, have your student play the J.S. Bach original followed by the new-made “not-exactly-tonal” movement. Then follow that with a movement from Luigi Dallapiccola’s *Quaderno musicale di Annalibera* (*Annalibera’s musical notebook*)— beautiful music created using serial organization techniques and distantly related to the J.S. Bach collection. With adventures like these we bypass and perhaps dismantle outright encumbering new-music “baggage.”



The closing bars of movement 1, “Simbolo,” from Dallapiccola’s *Quaderno musicale* bring forward the B-A-C-H motif in the right hand. (Copyright 1953, S.A. Edizioni Suvini Zerboni.)



Bach’s rhythmic vitality is purposefully invoked in the two-voice Movement One of Libby Larsen’s “PentaMetrics,” a commission from Friends of Today’s Music, MTAC. (mm 5–13). (Copyright 2005 Oxford University Press.)

Looking Forward

Across the United States new-music initiatives currently underway are designed to introduce the newest music to young, still-developing musicians in a *positive and exciting* fashion. Two examples of ensemble initiatives are New York City's New Music for Young Ensembles commissioning program, and the national *Bandquest* program, a project of American Composers Forum, with national offices in St. Paul, which centers on works for middle-school players presented at once in published music sets and in classroom teaching packages (published by Hal Leonard).

For pianists, there are a number of current local, regional and national new-music projects, three of which are described below. Each of these exemplar initiatives arose independently, and I have had the pleasure of being an invited composer-participant for all three. They are spearheaded by an independent pianist-teacher (Minnesota); a state-wide music teachers organization (California); and a music publishing house (Texas). Each is a hopeful indicator. Their approaches are distinct, but all three projects are conceived pragmatically, sharing common goals that auger well for success:

- (1) Each project is meant *to continue over time*.
- (2) The new compositions to be introduced come forward in print with intensive follow-up to widely advertise them, using companion recordings, placement on state-required music lists and as repertoire to be workshopped at regional, national and international piano conventions.
- (3) The new pieces are *created specifically to be "repertoire" works*, music of some depth, whose full qualities are revealed best over time and via the probing repetition of practice.
- (4) The composers involved are American musical creators specifically invited to participate. They know the piano and its repertoire and have already written successfully for the instrument, but perhaps haven't yet composed much music for *developing* pianists. Thus, these projects work simultaneously to broaden the horizons of the participating composers as well as those of the student pianists.

Project #1: TransAMERICAN

An anthology of 12 new compositions in idioms derived from jazz or pop foundations, geared for high-school piano students.

In 2005, Nicola Melville, associate professor of piano at Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota, designed this project to celebrate American musical creativity expressed in quintessential American styles in music meant for pre-college pianists. The new pieces would appeal in a manner similar to the appeal of Gershwin's *Three Preludes* or Copland's *Piano Blues*, having their genesis in colloquial dance music idioms that highlight a clear beat pattern, tune (or tune fragment) and would fit the hand size, and possibly the layout and patterning expectations, of experienced teenaged pianists.

Participating composers range from established figures, including Stephen Paulus and Augusta Read Thomas, to

up-and-coming ones, including Stacy Garrop and Carter Pann. They were given the widest possible latitude with no restrictions concerning the choice of underlying idiom, form or developmental treatment. As a result, the music is ear-catching and eminently playable. Among the titles to be found in *Volume One* are "Tango Gardél," "Defensive Chili," "Appalachian Breakdown," "Hitchin"—a travellin groove" and "Soirée Macabre: with demons on the dance floor."

Melville premiered all 12 of the pieces in *Volume One* in a gala weekend event at Carleton College September 28–30, 2007; the recording (Innova Records) and the published anthology became available in summer 2008.



Expressive, uneasy middle theme from Stacey Garrop's "Tango Gardél" (mm 49–58), a commission for Nicola Melville's TransAmerican project. Copyright 2007.

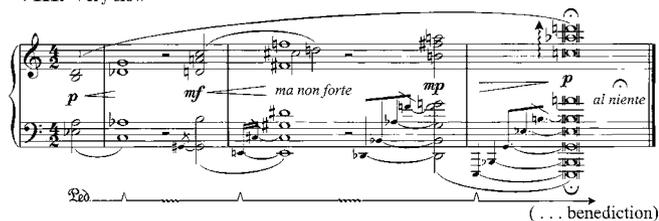
Project #2: "Friends of Today's Music"

Music Teacher's Association of California Foundation.

Begun in 1986, Friends of Today's Music is described as "a firm commitment to the music of our time, [expressed through the sponsored] creation of a wide variety of significant works, written...by many of today's leading, internationally renowned composers." Each year one new work is composed, commissioned expressly for young performers and is then *premiered by young performers*—often in multiple performances—at the organization's yearly convention, where the composer is present. The music is then widely disseminated via the organization's network, as a required work on repertoire lists and on the project's website (www.mtac.org/programs/fotm/index.shtml). All the music is published and, while not every piece is for piano solo, piano remains prominent throughout the project's history.

Target age for the performers is 'tweens and early teens—prior to high school. As MTAC's 2003 Commissioned Composer, I was given no restrictions except that the work be suitable for 11-year-old pianists (students approximately in their fourth year of study). My suite, *In My Lunchbox*, was successfully premiered by four 11-year-olds, and has since gone on to the organization's repertoire list. The 2004–2008 participating composers are Steven Stucky, Libby Larsen, William Bolcom, Gabriela Frank and Paul Chihara. Previous project composers who wrote specifically for piano include Richgard Felciano, Samuel Adler, Donald Waxman, Emma Lou Diemer and Seymour Bernstein.

VIII. Very slow



“VII (...benediction)” from *Nine New Bagatelles* by William Bolcom, a commission from Friends of Today’s Music, MTAC. Copyright 2006 by Edward B. Marks Company and Bolcom Music.

Project #3: Biennial American Composer’s Invitational Competition

A project of Jabez Press.

In 2005, Jabez Press, a music publishing house in Fort Worth, Texas, began a sequence of invitational composer’s competitions with the stated goal to expand international repertoire by discovering and publishing outstanding new music for piano. Douglas Briley, president of Jabez Press, is a pianist and composer, and the idea for the invitational competitions arose from his farsighted goal to expand the realm of widely recognized repertoire by adding significant new works of the current era. The initial competition, for extended works meant for concert-level performers, invited 60 composers to participate. It resulted in one work awarded the prize (which included publication), and four additional pieces receiving honorable mention. The prize composition, *A Calendar Set*, has now been issued, and plans are underway also to publish several of the other cited works. All of the cited pieces are given wide currency and published to a high standard: in well-designed editions printed on high-quality acid-free paper and distributed internationally.



An exuberant first movement sets the tone for the many jazz allusions in Robert Nelson’s *Impressions/Expression* for two pianos (mms 1–8); the winning composition of the 2008 Jabez Press Composers Invitational competition. Copyright 2008, Jabez Press.

The goal for the 2007 competition was shifted to concentrate on music for pre-college performers. All other aspects of the invitational competition remained the same.

Jabez Press presents workshops and clinics at national conferences such as the International Piano Pedagogy convention and MTNA national, regional and state conferences. Recently it has begun a sequence of podcasts, each devoted to one or more of the works it publishes, with the Composers Invitational prize pieces given prominence. For additional information visit www.jabezpress.com.

These three projects are just examples of a vital interest today across the United States in generating quality new music for developing musicians. There is no better way to keep the art of music alive and refreshed—for ourselves as teachers and artists and for our students—than by embracing the newest notes, and thereby celebrating the music of our own time.