

EDITORIAL: ARE YOU LOCAL?

Christopher Fox

In the BBC comedy series *The League of Gentlemen* there's a shop, run by Tubbs and Edward. Their approach to retail is not customer-friendly: 'This is a local shop, for local people' is the standard greeting to anyone with the temerity to come through the door, and in this issue of *TEMPO* we consider the role of the local in music today.

At the end of this issue we profile Fiona Robertson, director of **sound**, the new music festival for the north-east of Scotland. Fiona has just been awarded the Royal Philharmonic Society's Leslie Boosey Award in recognition of her fifteen years of work at **sound**, and in announcing the award the Chief Executive of the Royal Philharmonic Society, James Murphy, said that 'she has made new music resound in an area where it may otherwise scarcely be heard'. I may be a city-dweller these days, part of the lovie elite who perch on the hilltops of north London, but I have spent most of my life living in the north of England and that's the sort of statement that immediately triggers a flood of anti-metropolitanism through my Yorkshire veins. 'New music ... scarcely heard?' Do people in London think that there's a simple equivalence between the number of arts venues and people's engagement with unfamiliar music?

In her profile interview, Fiona Robertson offers a different perspective. **sound** promotes concerts in Aberdeen, but they also take events to more remote communities. Fiona admits that 'audiences can be significantly smaller in some cases, but the experience is very intense ... At times when audiences seem small we work out a population multiplier, between whichever small community we're in and London, and quite often work out that we'd fill Wembley stadium over four times!' It's an attractive argument, and my own experience of **sound** is not only that people have often travelled considerable distances to be part of the festival's audience but that their determination to be at the event also lends a special commitment to their listening. But is a **sound** audience member really worth several thousand Londoners? Isn't there a danger that the relative scarcity of new music events outside major cities might result in a corresponding reduction in critical listening?

Elsewhere in this issue we confront a different version of localism. The articles by Ian Power and Alexander Schubert both examine the ways in which particular narratives become dominant in new music, while the articles about the music of Helen Grime and Gwyn Pritchard consider the dominant narratives within particular composers' work. One might argue, and I suspect that some new music festival directors would do so, that there is a hierarchy of significance here, that the 'error aesthetic' on which Schubert focuses is, for example, of more current importance than the use of Scottish folk melodies within Helen Grime's music. A glance across the programmes of the major continental new music festivals would certainly suggest that work playing on the malfunction of bits of software and

hardware is regarded as having more relevance to life in the twenty-first century than skilfully crafted orchestral music – that indeed it is this progressive accent in programming that keeps them ‘major’.

The history of new music festivals in the twentieth century, from Metz to Zagreb, Donaueschingen to Warsaw, demonstrates that a belief that some types of work are inherently more progressive than others is deeply rooted. But can this still be the case in the plural, diverse twenty-first century? What claims do these festivals, or their successors, really have to progressiveness when their programming was, and often continues to be, so monochromatic and masculine? What significance do trans-national musical preoccupations, such as serialism in the middle of the twentieth century or internet 2.0 fifty years later, really have, beyond enabling composers to exert aesthetic hegemony and build careers?

None of these questions has, or should have, an easy answer, but they do turn on distinctions between the general and the local. New music festivals too often seem to value homogeneity over distinctiveness, with concert programmes built around a collection of new works that sound remarkably similar: the only flavour on offer is the flavour of the month. On the other hand, the local can sometimes be merely parochial, even nativist, but it also offers a reminder of what a varied place the world is: that here, in this place, people not only eat different food, dress for different weather, but also listen to different music.

Perhaps the most interesting music combines both a sense of how it is to be alive in the world at a particular time and also a sense of the distinctiveness of life in specific places. As W.H. Auden wrote, poets should hope ‘to be, like some valley cheese, local, but prized elsewhere’.