

CRICKETS IN THE POSTCOLONY: A CONVERSATION ON MUSIC

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A Johannesburg-based composer and a Montréal-based musicologist discuss the barriers to entry faced by non Euro-American composers who attempt to access the 'gated community of Western art music'.

Every aspiring composer, for better or worse, is born in a context, is attached to a territory, and has to come to terms with Western art music's long genealogy of forefathers. In the Anxiety of Influence (1973), Harold Bloom argues that every writer targets a work of art which he then attempts to exorcise, so he may demonstrate his capacity to overcome its power over him, to overcome the anxiety of influence. But the weight of History is unbearably heavy. Each 'insect' that attempts to detach itself from the stem risks death.

– Canadian composer, Amsterdam 2006.

Montréal
March 3rd, 2010

Dear Clare,

In this memorable interview from my fieldwork on contemporary Western art music, the 'insects' the composer was referring to were young composers from former colonies of Europe that are trying to make it in the world of Western art music. The choice of the word 'insect' – to portray their relative insignificance in the face of Western history and tradition, but also to put into perspective the enormity of the challenges that they have to overcome – stayed with me all through my subsequent fieldwork.

I, myself, was introduced to Western art music and studied it in that most of postcolonial situations: A Palestinian refugee taking classical piano lessons with an Indian teacher in a catholic school in a tiny Arab Emirate – Dubai, no less! – that was embarking on a race to beat the West at its own game by leapfrogging into globalized capitalism! This partly explains my fascination with all those young musicians in the world who graduated from Western conservatories in their countries, only to travel to Western Europe and North America, the uncontested centres of that tradition, to seek recognition and membership in the gated community of Western art music.

I obsessed over the word 'insect', desperately trying to find a positive turn somewhere beyond the disparaging image of a tiny, insignificant creature. I eventually came up with the image of the cricket, producing an annoying sound when alone, that turns into music when in groups. Music and sounds produced through friction, by rubbing the hind legs together, seemed to capture in my view the tension that underpins Western art music-making in a post-

colonial context. So insect it is, but not any insect! Or so I thought. As my research came to an end, I concluded my study on a rather pessimistic note, highlighting the architecture of indifference on which lay the foundations of Western history in general and especially Western art music.

a musical tradition that has consistently refused to recognize difference, and the role that it has played in the making of its own history

How do you acquire recognition, as a composer from the South, in a musical tradition that has consistently refused to recognize difference, and the role that it has played in the making of its own history? This is the question that has preoccupied me all through my research. How have these issues, in your experience as composer, played out in South Africa?

Yara

Johannesburg
March 9th, 2010

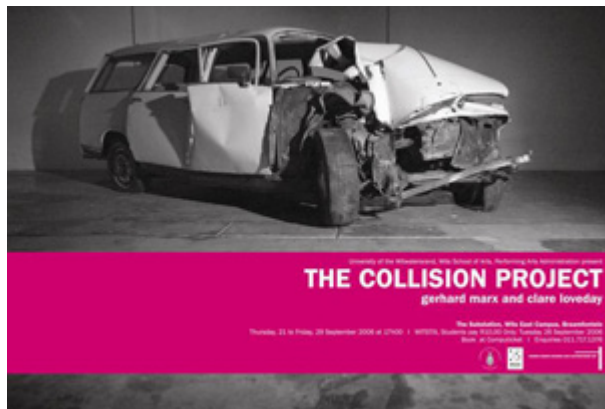
Dear Yara,

I am intrigued by the postcolonial beginnings of your musical journey. I detect in those words the slight sense of bewilderment you must have felt as a child at finding yourself in a warp of time and space, caught between countries, races, cultures and economies. You seem still to feel this, all these years later, living in Canada. The musician left the colony, but the colony didn't leave the musician, perhaps? How surprising for me to discover that Canadian composers also struggle with their musical identity. From South Africa, Canada seems peaceful, safe, functional, and immensely wealthy (everything is

relative); very different to the chaotic, strife-laden, desperately unequal South Africa that is my home. It is important, and humbling, to realise that composers in Canada can also struggle with identity and feelings of inadequacy.

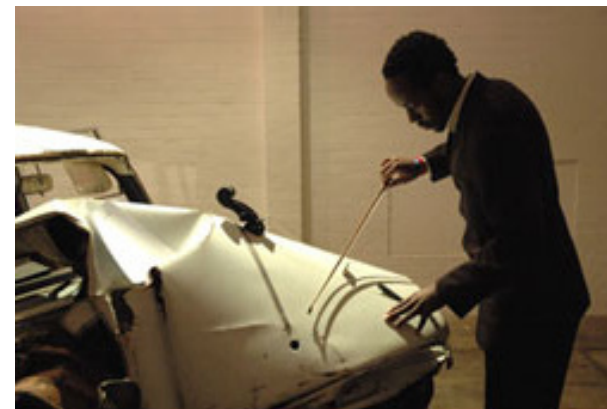
We do indeed risk death if we detach ourselves from our stem; but even clinging on is not completely within our power. One swat of the Northern hand, and we are dislodged. This mighty hand comes in numerous forms, including economic ones, that should not be underestimated. These include: the withdrawal of funding that provides access to education, performers, commissions; prohibitively expensive fees for competitions that also sometimes require technology many composers here simply cannot afford; the cost of visas and the obstacles created by the countries issuing them.

The first step in gaining recognition is getting your voice heard. Competing with composers who have access to far better resources is only one small part of this; the cost and difficulties composers here face in getting access to the Northern fields are often insurmountable. That musicians and music administrators in the North are sometimes astonishingly blasé and insensitive with regard to these, is well illustrated by an experience I had in 2008. I was trying to take *The Collision Project*, a work of mine for three performers and car wreck, to the International Society of Contemporary Music's (ISCM) World Music Days festival in Vilnius, Lithuania. One of the performers was Zimbabwean and I had been advised that it was unlikely he would be given a visa. I informed the festival organisers whose response was that I should apply through the Lithuanian embassy in Hungary. Hungary??? When did they last look at a world map? Did they even know what getting a



Poster for a performance of *The Collision Project*
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visa was about? I had to raise the funds for the trip, and the festival organisers were annoyed when I couldn't come up with the money. "In total this project budget I see is no bigger than 4000 Euros," I was briskly told. 4000 Euros is an astronomical amount of money. It is more than many South Africans earn in a year. I was furious. This is not an international society, I raged to anyone who would listen, but a developed world society that had no understanding or concern for the difficulties faced by composers from the South. Did they know how difficult it is to get funding in a country with far more pressing needs (like AIDS, T.B., basic housing), or how long it takes to fly to Europe, and how expensive it is for us just to get around once we are there?? But what could I do? Should I risk alienating myself from the ISCM by kicking up a fuss and, in the process, potentially make things difficult for other South African composers? Instead I clung quietly to my stem like a good cricket and sat silent (but fuming).



The Collision Project being performed in The Substation, Wits University, 2006.
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What is also revealing about this interaction is the organiser's extraordinary ignorance of the South, never mind South Africa. This is not unique, of course, and anyone living in the South will have experienced this. But what irks is that it is simply assumed that composers from the South are *au fait* with the European world, particularly its music and culture. A saxophonist in Vienna, for example, was contemptuous when he realised I did not know the Xenakis saxophone quartet. Composers from Europe would be appalled if I did not know about Stockhausen, Stravinsky, or Schönberg, to name but a few composers from the 20th century. They may know of African composers living in Europe who have 'made it' in Western terms, but how many of them can name even two African composers living in Africa? How can composers from the South even begin to seek recognition in such an enclosed and ignorant field?

Acquiring recognition in the Western art mu-

sic field is no mean feat. Gaining recognition in the South African field is also a challenge, where composers snarl and squabble over negligible resources. It is surprising that such a small field can generate so much tension. The personal vendettas and professional rivalries are legendary as few composers compete for limited recognition in terms of commissions and writing for few interested and capable performers, with few performance opportunities. Most opportunities have to be forged by composers themselves; they are not 'given'. Possibly because of these limitations, art music composition tends to be clustered around tertiary education institutions scattered around the country; jobs at these institutions thus bring power and prestige and, because of this, are another site of bitter fighting and conflict.

The fragility of the stalks we cling to, and the potentially aggressive crickets surrounding us in our little patch, may explain why so many composers here long for European structures, formality, and systems of measurement. These are tangible, familiar and offer some kind of imagined security. Compositional ability in South Africa tends to be measured in this way. If you can write in a particular style, or using particular systems of composition, your ability can be assessed (or, more importantly for the composer, recognised). This approach, to me, fails to recognise one of the advantages of composing here: surely we should be weighed down less by the western art music tradition than composers in, for example, Vienna? Surely we should be more prone to risk-taking? Sadly, in many cases, the opposite is true: those composers who do take creative risks are often treated with suspicion. Their works are, after all, much more difficult to measure. Possibly because of this, many here hang onto outdated

styles and modes of composition, clinging to what is familiar and measurable, improving their craft of composition, but producing the same *kinds* of works over and over again. The international fields are often viewed, at a distance, as gloriously perfect – we are a little group of crickets in a scrubby corner looking out at what we perceive to be a field of corn, resplendent with lush green leaves and strong stems. There is an ongoing sense of running after what we do not have.

There is another dimension to our complicated relationship with the North, more subtle and insidious. This is best illustrated by a project instigated by a renowned contemporary music ensemble based in Europe. They selected four European composers, who they commissioned to write works for the ensemble after living for a month in selected cities – chosen because they are cultural melting pots. The objective was that the works should reflect, in whatever way the composers chose, their host city. The composers duly arrived in South Africa, and I interacted with three of them. Two of these composers' only musical interest seemed to be in hearing 'traditional African music'; they had decided before arriving that this was the influence their compositions should show. This was Africa; where were the drums and marimbas? These composers showed no understanding that culture here, as anywhere, develops and changes; they could only see South Africa as they imagined it had been seen by the early European settlers. They were not interested in the music modern Johannesburg has to offer, so the vibrantly energetic, multi-cultural environment they were staying in seemed to pass them by. The message was clear: the musical world of Johannesburg has no value in Northern eyes.

No feedback was ever sent to South Africa. I only knew the works were eventually performed in Europe (and possibly the other cities in the project, although I could not get confirmation of this) because I maintained contact with one of the composers. Those of us who had donated a great deal of time and effort to welcoming these composers and showing them the city were, not surprisingly, annoyed. Where was the give and take? Had they ever considered having composers from the South living in European cities and writing works to represent their impressions? Clearly not. So what are we: providers of the musical toy box for the lofty Europeans to scratch around in? Our city, our home, was treated like a kind of musical dip, a source of exotic accoutrements to decorate what really matters: European art music by European art music composers to be played by European ensembles, showing us ignorant Africans how it should be done.

For the first time, I really understood the term 'postcolony'. I experienced the helpless fury at having someone rich and clumsy assess my cultural world, find it unimportant and invalid, but taking away little bits and pieces to show his/her chums in the big green corn field. I was astounded, not only by this patronising attitude, but also by the fact that I did not challenge it properly. I realised later that, although I felt uncomfortable, I am so used to bowing before the Great European Tradition that I assumed my discomfort was misplaced. I came to understand what this small interaction represented in a larger world; this unchallenged cultural prejudice – the last colonial outpost – helped to explain the sense of inferiority experienced by many South African composers. How can we possibly be as good as our Northern counterparts when we believe we are not

learning in and experiencing the centre, the heart of culture, the place of intellect and *real* music? (You would be horrified to know how rigorously this is reinforced at numerous tertiary institutions in South Africa, but that is another subject for another time.)

[I experienced the helpless fury at having someone rich and clumsy assess my cultural world](#)

In the face of this kind of prejudice, how can South African composers who write neither like Northerners, nor trade on their ‘Africaness’ by overtly including African elements in their work, hope for recognition in the North? (These ‘African elements’ are yet another topic for another conversation.) It is hardly surprising, then, that many composers here look out at the big corn field beyond their limiting borders, and long to be part of it and recognised in it.

This all sounds completely hopeless. But there are wonderful things about composing here. For the moment, however, I will stay with the North/South relationship. In spite of all the problems and prejudices I mention, I have had some good experiences. I recently submitted a work to a competition (emptying my bank account to pay the fees) and was successful. My work for 12 saxophones, *Duodectet*, is being performed at the ISCM’s World New Music Days Festival in Sydney in May. I have now forgiven the ISCM just a little bit for the Vilnius debacle, partly because there is some kind of grim consolation in knowing it will cost Europeans even more to fly to Sydney than it is costing me!

I should also say that I have encountered some performers who have been open and receptive to music that may be atypical. My double saxophone concertante *Blink* was received favourably in Vienna

by some of the musicians and organisers involved in its’ performance, although this seemed to come as something of a surprise to them. They described the work as ‘different’, which it is certainly when played next to the very serious, highly structured Germanic music of many Viennese composers. Perhaps they were a little surprised that this difference didn’t sound overtly African?

I could go on and on. But I think for now I’ll stop and listen to the flock of Red-billed Wood-Hoopoes cackling in a nearby tree.

Clare

Montréal
March 17th, 2010

Dear Clare,

I cannot tell you how much what you express here resonates with what composers I’ve worked with have told me. If I may summarize your insights a bit, I think you bring up a number of extremely important issues. First of all, economic power dynamics; second, issues of mobility / immobility in a unilaterally globalized world; third, the aesthetics of formalism and how it might reflect questions of recognition, legitimization, but also a quest for the relative security of form and structure when one is trying to express oneself through a medium that is alien or alienating. And of course the last issue is that of representation, meaning the representation of the Other.

Unfortunately space and time won’t allow me to go through all of these important issues extensively. We need to talk some more and on many more occasions! But let me focus on a couple of them.

First, economics, because while critical analyses

of Western art music have been able to highlight the cultural hegemony, reductionist representations and power politics that underpin this music that is still so enveloped in a discourse of transcendence, the question of economics remains somewhat untouched: An Argentinean composer I met during my research was very clear about what he thought the North / South divide in terms of Western art music was all about. It has nothing to do with culture, identity, or even politics, and everything to do with money and infrastructure. He summed it up like this: “Why am I living and composing in Amsterdam instead of Argentina? Very simple. Who is going to perform a contemporary music piece in Buenos Aires? Nobody! There are simply not enough ensembles, venues, or patrons for this kind of music, especially if it is experimental in anyway.” Another composer, this time speaking of why Canadian composers feel obliged to leave their country in order to pursue their music careers, put it in the following words: “The field of contemporary music in Canada is too small. Take one too many steps and you simply fall off the edge of the world.” That is why, in most peripheral countries, as you said, institutions become very important. They are there to provide a sense of solidness to a shaky cultural scene. They provide cover. Hardly anyone can survive beyond the institutions that are built for this kind of music, unless they leave the country all together. And that brings us to the question of cultural policy which is often put forward as a solution for all these problems.

In the province of Québec, where I live, the public funding of contemporary Western art music rests mainly on the requirement to train future generations of musicians and composers; in other words,

on education and musical pedagogy. This criteria is designed, on the one hand, to remedy contemporary music's lack of public appeal, and on the other, to build a home-grown Western art music tradition from the ground up, in which today's young musicians and composers potentially become tomorrow's canonical figures, providing Québec with its own local repertory and national musical heritage. This strategy is part of a larger cultural policy that leans heavily on education as a form of nation-building. Québec maintains a strong separatist movement which is, nevertheless, continually offset, in the public sphere, by a potent identity discourse of ambivalence and in-between-ness, resulting from its attachment, both to Europe as a former French colony, and to North America, as part of Canada.

During my research, I looked at the impact of these policies and identity politics on those who have dedicated their lives to contemporary music. Their experiences led me to conclude that cultural policy that was developed to promote contemporary music has, paradoxically, contributed to its increasing marginalization. Thanks to the focus on education, there are more composers and musicians graduating than ever. However, that has led to an unbalanced investment in funding programmes for commissions and first compositions designed especially for all these young music graduates. The result is an ever-increasing number of music works being produced, but not enough funds to ensure their performance and broadcast beyond their premiere concerts. As one composer who has been on both sides of the funding system has told me, the music disappears almost as quickly as it appears leaving no trace in the public's collective memory!

The second issue I want to get back to you on is this amazing insight you give about the attraction of formalism or well-established styles and aesthetics for composers in South Africa. Here again, I see parallels with the works of other 'Southern composers' I have worked with. One Brazilian composer had built his whole music work based on the proportions of the Golden number, while the Argentinean composer built his work using very strict serial techniques.

According to literary critic Raymond Williams, the engagement with musical form among composers at the peripheries of European and North American metropolises is something that is anchored in the larger history of the avant-garde movement and the role that immigrant or exiled composers played in its development. In his book, *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists* (1989), Williams argues that the avant-garde movement is mostly the product of immigrant musicians' experiences of alienation in European metropolises: "The most important general element of the innovations in form is the fact of immigration to the metropolis, and it cannot too often be emphasized how many of the major innovators were, in this precise sense, immigrants. At the level of theme, this underlies, in an obvious way, the elements of strangeness and distance, indeed of alienation, which regularly form part of the repertory."

Reading this was a revelation to me. Not only did it bring home the fact that Western art music has always developed through encounters with the Other, but also the fact that this Other is subsequently erased from its official historical narrative as an active contributor to its making.

Western art music has always developed through encounters with the Other

Williams portrays the European metropolis of the beginning of the 20th century as this big black hole that had the capacity to suck in difference and diversity into an amalgam of miscellaneity. A miscellaneity that produced new forms of strangeness and alienation that translated, according to him, into the first innovative experimentations of the avant-garde: "The new relationships of the metropolis ... forced certain productive kinds of strangeness and distance: a new consciousness of conventions and thus of changeable, because now open, conventions.... The preoccupying visual images and styles of particular cultures did not disappear, any more than native languages, native tales, the native styles of music and dance, but all were now passed through the crucible of the metropolis which was ... no mere melting pot but an intense and visually and linguistically exciting process in its own right, from which remarkable new forms emerged."

Elsewhere he notes: "At the same time, within the very openness and complexity of the metropolis, there is no formed and settled society to which the new kinds of work could be related. The relationships were to the open and complex and dynamic social process itself, and the only accessible form of this practice was an emphasis on the medium: the medium as that which, in an unprecedented way defined art.... This emphasis on the medium, and on what can be done in the medium, became dominant. Moreover, alongside the practice, theoretical positions of the same kind... [on] the new aesthetics of significant form and structure, rose to direct, to support, to reinforce, and to recommend."

What he intends by medium here, is the aesthetic *objet*, meaning pure linguistic or musical material and forms. In his own complicated style, Williams is basically making the same argument as you are; that is, form, for those who feel excluded or marginalized becomes a security blanket, and in this case, contemporary composers are doubly motivated to cling to form since it has been canonized through the institutionalization of avant-gardist ideology in music schools and conservatories. So it becomes very hard to resist form, since it simultaneously provides legitimacy (you demonstrate that you know the styles that have been canonized), it gives you something solid to hang on to musically, and it provides a sense of marginal security. Isn't it ironic that this avant-gardist ideal was the product of the alienation of other 'Others'?

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So the question that I always end up arriving at when I have this conversation with contemporary composers is this: Why? Why choose Western music, why Western ART music and why the tougher, more exclusive world of CONTEMPORARY Western art music? Why, I have asked the composers time and time again, do you want to be part of this club? This might be an unfair question, since many say that they do not see themselves as composing in a specific repertory or genre of music, but simply as composing. Others also tell me that they simply consider this music as being part of their heritage and do not see themselves as outsiders wanting in, even though they are treated that way.

But I can't help but wonder what led them to take



The Collision Project being performed in The Substation, Wits University, 2006.

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that particular aesthetic route when other options are available. Why go into an institution instead of learning by playing in music clubs? (I'm thinking about how city music developed in Johannesburg.) Why seek that recognition in those specific conditions, for example by participating in contemporary music competitions?

Yara

Johannesburg
March 19th, 2010

Dear Yara,

This is all so interesting, and it is good to know that my experience, here on the bottom bit of the African continent, is not unique. Indeed, it seems that all composers except those in Europe or the U.S. experience this. With a shift in our perception (there are probably more of us than them), the 'Othering' would reverse. What a titillating thought!

But to answer your final question. Yes, indeed, why choose such an underfunded, status-obsessed, piranha-infested, and downright difficult profession? I think it is partly the challenge. It is also so *interesting* to ask difficult questions of my profession and my field (which has made me very unpopular at times). I do not ever want to be complacent about where I live and what I do. Living in a complicated country may have something to do with that. But perhaps if I lived in Australia, for example, I would do it too, just to keep myself on my toes. It is the same question that could be asked of any academic: why go into a profession that is demanding, underpaid and often politically fraught? I am sure the answer would be the same: because the hoped for rewards are worth the sacrifices.

There is a deeply selfish side. Writing this music is hard. Each time you set about composing a work, you have to think about what you want to say. You ask: Why am I writing this work? What am I saying? How much consideration should I give to the venue in which it is being premiered? Do I want the players to enjoy playing it, or do I want to challenge them? How can I make the audience think differently about these instruments / players / venues / musical parameters, and so on. The questions are hard.

Answering them is harder. Composing 'art music' takes a long time. Every note is considered, every pulse, every dynamic, every articulation. It is long, difficult work. And every now and then you get it right. You write a work that seems to hit something, that indefinable 'it' that excites the players, maybe some of the audience too. The music takes on a life of its own, sparkles and giggles, runs up and down the walls, pulls you in and pushes you about. And in those very rare moments, it is as though you have reached out and touched the face of God. It is utterly extraordinary. Have you ever wondered why so few musicians in the art music world are religious? Now you know.

I worked for many years in a more commercial environment. I played in theatre shows, worked on cruise ships, wrote jingles. It was fun, but my goodness it was boring after a while. I was bored with the cocaine-sniffing clients, the greed of the commercial world, the 'creative types'. I simply could not envisage myself working this way indefinitely.

Your comment that some do it because it is part of their heritage took me by surprise. I had never thought of it as part of a heritage, certainly not in South Africa where frankly this particular heritage is an embarrassment. It is quite odd to think of art music composition in such an uncomplicated cultural space.

The only reason I enter competitions ... is in an effort to get my works performed.

You ask: *Why seek that recognition in those specific conditions, for example by participating in contemporary music competitions?* I cannot talk for my colleagues. The only reason I enter competi-

tions (and I have only entered three, only one which I had to pay for), is in an effort to get my works performed. To write specifically for competitions is, I think, madness. The last competition I entered was an attempt to get a ridiculously big work I wrote for twelve saxophones performed. Why did I write this long, technically and musically demanding work for twelve saxophones when I know full well that South Africa does not have twelve good enough saxophonists to play it? I was in that slightly deranged state one gets in towards the end of a doctorate, and I needed a whopper of a work, a great big swagger to show off how much I knew. Hence *Duodectet*, and my only serious investment in a competition. Was it worth it? I'll tell you after the performance.

Do I want to be part of the club? Yes and no. I do want to be part of it, but as the composer I am. I am not interested in adjusting to fit in. I did not do that here, in this tiny little puddle, and yet have managed to make a space for myself. I am a South African. I am a composer. I am allowed to be contrary.

Clare