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Searching New Music For Keepers

By [ALLAN KOZINN](#)

“Most of the music we play,” a musician who specializes in contemporary works told me recently, “is not great. Some of it is very good, but it lacks something. It falls short. But we need to play it — not only because something great may turn up, and if we don’t play it, we won’t know it, but also because this is the music being composed now, and it ought to be heard.”

The player, who was speaking casually and not for attribution out of fear of giving offense, is one whose performances are typically passionate and persuasive, and his comment seemed startling at the moment. Watching him play, you would think that he is thoroughly committed to whatever he is performing — and at the moment, he probably is. One psychological process musicians use in gearing up for a concert, after all, is to convince themselves that the music on their stand, whether old or new, is the greatest work ever composed.

This musician’s assessment should not have surprised me, not because new music is inherently no good, as its detractors would have it, but because it captured the essence of a new-music performer’s job. On the surface the musicians seem to be advocates for these works, but actually their main job is to play an endless stream of untested scores, with an ear open for the keepers. And when the program ends, musicians must become discerning critics who examine what they have played and assess whether they want to keep it in their repertoires — in practical terms, whether they want to argue with concert presenters on its behalf or let it slip quietly into the “been there, played that” file.

Musicians who mostly perform the standard repertory but occasionally take on something new go through this process too, and whether they continue exploring contemporary music is probably a function of how satisfying their experiences are.

Their mileage clearly varies. [Christian Tetzlaff](#) has been best known for his Bach and Brahms, but his [knockout performance](#) of Ligeti’s complex, idiosyncratic Violin Concerto at Zankel Hall on Dec. 19 brought down the house. He has more contemporary adventures lined up for the [Carnegie Hall](#) Perspectives series this season. So does [Anne-Sophie Mutter](#), in her residency with the [New York Philharmonic](#). And [Hilary Hahn](#), having found satisfaction and success in [Jennifer Higdon’s Violin Concerto](#) — which won the [Pulitzer Prize](#) this year — is now commissioning 20 composers to write encore pieces for her.

Many of their colleagues seem content to keep grinding out [Tchaikovsky](#), [Beethoven](#) and Brahms concertos, with little concern for new works. But it is becoming clear to more and more musicians, especially younger ones, that if they are going to have careers — or even a field to have careers in — they cannot keep playing the pillars of the standard canon over and over, spectacular though those works may be.

Listeners who dislike new music, either because they disdain contemporary musical languages or because they simply want to hear what they already know and love, might argue that musicians should do this sifting on their own and perform only the works that they can say, hand on heart, are masterpieces. And that sounds reasonable, to a point. But where new works are concerned, musicians are, to borrow a term from the computer world, beta testers. The problem is that in music, beta testing necessarily involves listeners as well.

It is not enough for a work to be ingenious or compelling enough to engage the musician or ensemble members who learn it. Even if performers eventually look critically at the work, they have an investment in it at first. They may have chosen the composer and had a hand in raising the commissioning fees and, at the very least, have devoted hours to practicing it. They are bound, at least for a while, to regard it as great music worthy of everything they have put into it.

Musicians need listener feedback to know whether a piece speaks to anyone else. That response may come in the form of post-concert comments and published criticism, but most immediately a musician will have a more visceral sense during the performance of how an audience feels about the work at hand. And the audience, by creating a buzz about the music or the composer and buying tickets to hear the piece the next time it is performed, becomes part of the mechanism that either sends a score into oblivion or finds it a berth in the repertory.

Even that is not enough to seal a work's fate. If the great masterpieces of the canon were determined entirely by the opinions of the musicians and listeners who first played them and heard them, J. C. Bach would be far more beloved than his father, Johann Sebastian. Salieri would be the star and [Mozart](#) the footnote, and [Hummel](#) would be the great virtuoso of the early 19th century.

The Beethoven "Eroica" Symphony, which audiences found baffling both for its length (at nearly an hour, it was more than twice as long as the symphonies they were used to) and its audacious effects, would be a rarity now. Though Mahler had his disciples, in his day and in the years after his death in 1911, it was not until the last couple of decades that his canonization, so to speak, was complete. And if you page through the reviews quoted in [Nicholas Slonimsky's "Lexicon of Musical Invective,"](#) you will discover that many works now considered deathless masterpieces were dismissed, sometimes violently, at first hearing.

Lately young composers and players have come to understand that audiences will always make up their own minds about which composers from past eras are important, and they have therefore developed a new approach to creating the future's classics: they simply refuse to worry about it.

Instead of creating works meant to resonate as grand statements through all eternity, they are doing what [Handel](#), Haydn and Mozart did before them: writing the music that they want to write, according to their own lights, and letting history take care of itself.

They are tweaking convention by weaving currents of indie rock and jazz into their compositions, alongside the influences of Serialism, Minimalism, Cagean indeterminacy, neo-Classicism or whatever interests them at the moment. They are writing for ensembles in which electric guitars and laptops join forces with classical string, woodwind, brass and percussion instruments. And they are performing this music wherever they can, in concert halls, lofts and, increasingly, in trendy clubs where mostly (though not exclusively) young audiences eagerly soak it up.

They are making the business of new music fun.

Which is as it should be. It is an approach, in fact, that represents classical music's best hope of having a future at all. This vibrant new world may appear at times to break ranks with classical music as it has been performed for so long. But its musicians have built a new audience by celebrating the new.

Much of that audience would probably agree with the musician who observed that not everything he is performing is for the ages. Of a random 1,000 works composed in any musical era, how many are? But these listeners, like the musicians they follow, understand that it is worth bearing with the good, and even the mediocre, in the hope that an unknown great score is just over the horizon.