



Making the Leap: Christopher Small's Visionary Musicology

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“[Habitual patterns] are needed if we are to reassure ourselves that *this* is how the world really is and that *this* is our place in it, that our values, our idea of the pattern which connects, are real and valid. But we also need performances that expand our concepts of relationships, that present relationships in a new and unfamiliar light, bring us to see our place in the world from a slightly different point of view. It is not just those performers who are called great who can do this for us; it is open to anyone who can use his or her powers to descend into the underworld and return with new visions. Everyone can be his or her own shaman” (Small 1998: 218).

As a pianist who probably walked into the wrong department in the mid-1990s to start an undergraduate course in Psychology, I remember the Music department that was situated next door as the source of a fascination so deep, that a change of course at the first available instance was next to inevitable. For the brief period of time I spent in my grey and dull social sciences world, it seemed like there was no life outside of class. On evenings and weekends, all the lights would go out and the entire building would fall silent. Meanwhile, the brightly lit, purpose-built department a few yards away, had a recital hall where people would rehearse freely any time of day, and all around the building there were people playing music, writing music, thinking music and talking music late into the night, on weekdays, sports days, weekends and Bank Holidays. I recall taking a couple of elective modules in the Music department and thinking music students had to be the luckiest persons alive, sitting and listening to music in class, making the music they love and getting a degree for it. As soon as I decided I would join them, I had already started wondering about all the wonderful things the study of music could entail. What could it really mean to “study music?” In fact, this is a question I have yet to answer fully, though it has become quite clear to

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me that what music *actually* means to most people is something altogether different from what they feel it *could*, or perhaps *should* mean. If anything, Christopher Small's output was perhaps the boldest attempt to bridge this yawning, grinning gap between music as something we do, and music as a professional qualification.

It was not until the end of my Master's in Music that I quite accidentally came across a copy of Small's book *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening*. By then, if I had to narrate the story of musicology in the form of a few quick questions, I would probably have it start with the thorny and dismissive “is (this) music any good?”, a question posed by aestheticians and music critics in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. If “this music” referred to the great canon of post-Renaissance masterpieces then the answer was “yes”; and through the hard-core formalism of Hanslick in the late 19th century, this affirmation was narrowly identified with absolute music, and re-posed as “why is (this) music so good?” Fast forwarding to the late 20th century, self-serving

questions of this kind seemed to have been gradually exhausted and crystallised into a depressing “what more can one possibly say about music?” Of course there were several leaps of logic there. The real question felt more like “what else can we [i.e. a broadly defined spectrum of “music professionals”] possibly say about *this* music [[i.e. what we define as “Western art music”], *which we undoubtedly know to be of value* [because it would be self-defeating to suggest otherwise]?”

New musicology exposed the many hidden corollaries of this question. It addressed the implications of a seemingly bottomless pit of concealed but dominant narratives that underlay the foundations of academic and institutionally supported study of music. By highlighting the role of social organisation, gender politics, institutionalisation and cultural identity in the construction of musical values and traditions, post-1980s musicology opened vast new areas for what might be broadly defined as music studies. It did not, however, replace that main question entirely. Most of the criticism surrounding the frontline radicalism of musicologists like Susan McClary (1987; 1991), Richard Leppert (1987) and Lawrence Kramer (1990) was that this was little more than a bunch of academics ‘inventing’ research areas for a field that was already well-documented, in a desperate and self-justifying attempt to ensure the sustainability of musicology as an academic profession (Stanley 2001; Taruskin 2005).

What Small proposed, however, was something more implicitly radical. In the postlude to his *Musicking* the question is no longer summed up as “what can I say about music?” but rather “what right do I have to talk about any musical activity?” and “what does this all say about me?” I cannot think of many other instances where musicology becomes more genuinely self-reflective. This shift of focus practically encouraged us to consider the theoretical study of music not in terms of a profession or a discipline, but as a practice, a set of choices manifested in direct and creative actions; a practice as morally accountable as any other, including the practice of music-making in all its guises.

From *Music-Society-Education* (1977) right through to *Musicking* (1998) Small consistently reminded his readers that music is a dynamic and inclusive process that involves everyone, not just a fixed, exclusive product to be preciously guarded by institutions, exhibited in stately buildings and admired for its self-standing beauty. Back in the 1970s, this viewpoint was certainly in line with an emerging action-based culture which found its voice in the politicised experimentalism of composers like Cornelius Cardew and improvising

collectives like the Scratch Orchestra and AMM. Nevertheless, Small’s interest in processes seems to have taken a slightly different direction from the writings of many of his contemporaries, who advocated the importance of process as a theoretical basis for the appropriation of experimental and improvised music (Bailey 1980; Nyman 1974/1999; Prevost 1994). By placing the emphasis on process as *practice*, and considering this practice as a set of fundamentally social relations, Small called for a culturally sensitive shift of focus towards the everyday, localised specificities of music-making. His writings also exemplified a paradigmatic shift of interest towards non-recorded, non-repeatable, non-marketable musical contexts that had been consistently marginalized from the mainstream of Western art music: towards oral traditions, spontaneous and improvised musical meetings, rituals of all scales and purposes. This was the thinking that sparked a whole new strand of research on music as an informal practice. We should engage with music as people live and breathe it, even if this falls outside the notion of music that has been officially or formally validated by institutions and industries (DeNora 2004; Finnegan 1989/2007; Frith 2002).

This understanding of music as an informal practice also sparked a radically revised consideration of the nature of performance itself. Free from its connotations of performativity and efficiency (Lyotard 1988), performance came to be addressed as a relational space. This was no longer a quantifiable procedure that yields global, repeatable results to be assessed and validated externally. Small’s emphasis on relationships and relativity sent out a clear message that challenged the social and conceptual boundaries which separate listeners, performers, composers and critics: only by examining those relationships that we consider to be universal, or whose validity we take for granted can we achieve the kind of shamanic ‘epiphany’ that is evoked in his opening quote. The phrasing may at times sound grandiose; in the end it just comes down to gaining awareness of one’s acquired behaviours and shaping them accordingly. If you are sitting on a chair listening to music that is performed in front of you, it makes a difference to know that you are keeping quiet not because it is customary or obligatory to do so, but because you consider silence as the optimal mode of contribution to that type of musical activity. And if you do not agree with the hierarchical implications of this relational model, you can explore alternative contexts, where silence fulfils a different kind of function.

Small’s relativity serves primarily to empower listeners and performers, while at the same time demystifying the roles imparted to composers and

critics within the context of a post-Renaissance Western art music tradition. The somewhat prescriptive nature of this model is certainly one of its limitations. And as societies change and practices re-adjust to such changes, Small's remarks also acquire a perhaps inadvertently prophetic tinge. The idea that each score is just a toolkit for performers (and by extension virtually everyone) to make something out of, a set of lego-like bricks that we use to construct our very own unique sound world (Small 1998: 217), is of course very liberating. However, through this idea Small also seems to have hinted at the core of a marketable model of customisation, whereby each toolkit comes with its own parts which are compatible only with their own toolkit, and perhaps even non-transferable across different packages. On the one hand, this logic is highly resonant of the oft-quoted idea of post-1945 art music being expressed in as many different languages as there are composers, or even scores (Nyman 1974/1999). On the other, it brings to mind the market strategy that has since made millions for major computer corporations, and has led many a disgruntled computer user to the use of free, open source platforms. That "how we like to music is who we are" (Small 1998: 220) is perhaps disturbingly easy to translate into a customisation slogan like "what does your [coffee / car / mobile phone] say about you?" or "how do you like yours?", and therefore evoke the kind of pseudo-individuality that Adorno and the Frankfurt School theorists had been prophetically warning against since the 1930s.

The main difference, and that is well worth pointing out, is that Small spoke of a self-defined relationship to music that resists external packaging. "How we like to music", therefore, can also, in times of conflict translate to "how we choose to music, against all odds". Now if art, according to Small (1977: 2), can "make us aware of possibilities of alternative societies whose existence is not yet", perhaps music studies can aspire to do this too. With a deepening worldwide financial crisis, a growing tendency to question arts education and a marked return to the values of positivism and marketable science, the sustainability of music as an academic (or other) profession is far from being ensured at present. Reading Small's foresights of a context-sensitive, adaptive, practice-based musicology, however, we are provided with a potential lifeline – a kind of vital metaphor. The Batesonian "pattern which connects" (Small 1998: 53) does not have to be expressed as a constant competition between the uneven, and fundamentally incomparable worlds of the arts and sciences, of the theorists and the practitioners, the amateurs and the professionals, the individuals and the markets. By extension, the

field of music studies need not be a finite set of autonomous objects that are waiting to be assessed and classified in accordance with such patterns. Rather, the study of music can be reconceived as an endless, inexhaustible interplay of changing relations, indicative and expressive not just of who we are, but also of who we want to be.

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