Acad. Quest. (2013) 26:459–464
DOI 10.1007/s12129-013-9382-3

ARTICLE

A Musing on Schuller's *Musings*

Daniel Asia

Published online: 11 October 2013
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For many years Gunther Schuller was at the center of the classical music world, as a player, composer, conductor, writer, record producer, polemicist and publisher for new music and jazz, educator, and president of New England Conservatory.

I met Schuller at Tanglewood in 1979. While I was not an effective student (there was way too much careerist hustling in the air), it was an exhilarating experience. Gunther would occasionally mark me with his gaze and utter some pronouncement such as "Make sure you really hear the music you write"—I was then doing mostly textural stuff marked by the influence of my main teacher, Jacob Druckman, and other favorites including György Ligeti, Witold Lutoslawsk, and Earle Brown—or "I am a good B composer" (very unusual for Gunther, who has, one could say, a healthy ego; but then, don't most composers?). By that point, Gunther had written extensively about jazz and new music, although I hadn't taken much notice. Then, and to almost the same extent now, I am more interested in what a composer says in his music than in his words. But if some things can only be said in music, the same is true for words.

Recently, I came across Schuller's *Musings* (1986) shortly after I put my ideas about John Cage and Elliott Carter out into the world.[1] The book,

[1]Gunther Schuller, *Musings: The Musical Worlds of Gunther Schuller: A Collection of His Writings* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1986). Daniel Asia, "The Put On of the Century, or the Cage Centenary," *Huffington Post*, January 3, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/daniel-asia/the-put-on-of-the-century_b_2403915.html. Daniel Asia, "Carter Is Dead," *Huffington Post*, April 25, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/daniel-asia/carter-is-dead_b_2838247.html.

Daniel Asia is professor of composition at the University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ 85721; info@danielasia.net. The distinguished composer of numerous works, including five symphonies, he received a 2010 Music Academy Award given by the American Academy of Arts and Letters. A shorter version of this piece appeared under the title "A Short Musing on Schuller's *Musings*," in the July 17, 2013, *Huffington Post.*

subtitled *The Musical Worlds of Gunther Schuller: A Collection of His Writings*, is intriguing as a historical document and deserving of commentary. About the first third of *Musings* concerns jazz. These essays are pithy takes on important issues or seminal figures in jazz. Thus, Schuller covers the definition of jazz, its early history, the nature of form—"We must learn to think of form as a verb rather than a noun"[2]—and looks at Ellington, Cecil Taylor, Ornette Coleman, Paul Whiteman, Scott Joplin, Sonny Rollins, Lee Konitz, and Alec Wilder. The remaining two-thirds of *Musings* examines the world of contemporary classical music in sections titled "Music Performance and Contemporary Music" and "Music Aesthetics and Education." These essays first appeared in print from the early 1960s to the mid-1980s, a seminal cultural and musical period. It should come as no surprise that Schuller displays a large degree of growth, even a complete change of viewpoint, during this period.

Let's start with Schuller's take on his created genre, "third stream." This term, which denotes a comingling of jazz and classical, was, for Schuller, figuratively a verb. Thus he meant it always to be something in development, in the process of becoming, and certainly not a fixed genre or category. One might even ask if the term could be broadened to include the comingling of *any* musics with Western classical music, as in African drumming for Steve Reich, Indian music for Philip Glass, or pop for John Adams. But as Schuller states over and over, it isn't about the makeup of the music or its influences, since "I don't care what category music belongs to; I only care whether it is good or bad."[3] He says that as an artist he must call on all musical experiences in his life that have meaning for him. That, by necessity, these experiences must come to play in his musical creations. And that what subsequently is written must come out of a deep respect for both traditions. Schuller also thinks that all classical and vernacular traditions are worthy of our support and interest. "*All musics are created equal*," he asserts in 1981, and it "is a global concept which allows the world's musics…to come together, to learn from one another, to reflect human diversity and pluralism" (emphasis in original).[4]

It is a utopian concept at heart, and as Schuller would learn, in the realm of contemporary classical music, utopianism doesn't work very well, as we shall see. So in its universal conception, do Schuller's views leave any room for the authentically particular? And can all musics be "equal," inasmuch as only

[2]Schuller, "Third Stream Revisited," in *Musings*, 19.

[3]Schuller, "Third Stream," in *Musings*, 115.

[4]Ibid., 120.

Western music embraces harmony and polyphony, and no other music has these qualities (except perhaps for jazz, because it is as much a Western as a black phenomenon, in its combining of harmony and African polyrhythms). The only music Schuller really despises, incidentally, is commercial music—that is, music written for the market, which implies music for hire as well as most popular music.

But when push comes to shove and concert space and time is limited, decisions must be made. Performance and music choices can't be made on the simple distinction between music that comes from the heart and music that is purely commercial, as Schuller does. He suggests that in the future the idea of a "third stream" will be inevitable, and he views it with relish. I wonder what he thinks now. In this 1961 essay he asks that the music be appraised on its own terms, and not that of the critics. Perhaps he makes this request because third stream music never really caught on, while a bland and pureed crossover did.

In the 1980s, Schuller was the major advisor for the country's most prominent new music showcase, the Fromm New Music Festival at Tanglewood, where he was criticized for his unwillingness to countenance diversity in the realm of concert music. Quite simply, it was said that he forbade the inclusion of the minimalists Reich, Glass, and Adams (the last then counted in that circle). Now even if this music proves not to last, it was a puzzling position for Schuller to take. For was not Reich, who grew up on jazz, and then studied African drumming in Ghana, and was a philosophy student as well, a perfect example of the symbiotic possibilities of the third stream approach? Was not Glass, who studied with both Nadia Boulanger and Ravi Shankar, another paradigmatic example of the definition? Or Adams, who studied with Leon Kirchner, a Schoenberg pupil, who then wished to integrate the vitality of American pop with a plethora of American influences ranging from Charles Ives to Morton Feldman to Glenn Branca? What more could Schuller have asked for—or was this not the third stream that he had envisioned?

I can understand that Schuller may not have cared for or respected such composers, but from an intellectual standpoint, their musical works fit his definition of third stream well. And when you call for a revolution, you cannot control the outcome.

As a young composer, Schuller was very much attuned to the notion of musical progress, as exemplified by his belief in, and the near deification of, the "twelve-tone language," as he calls it.[5] In this, he was aligned with the

[5]Schuller, "Composing for Orchestra," in *Musings*, 153.

European avant-garde, moving from Schoenberg and Anton Webern (as he rarely mentions Alban Berg; I suspect he thought him a backslider) to Pierre Boulez and Milton Babbitt. He makes the point, referencing performers rather than the common man, when he states: "I believe that the time will come when the twelve-tone language will be so familiar that sophisticated players and listeners will hear and 'feel' derived sets, such as those used in this *Symphony*" or in his Tanglewood programs that were full of academic serialists.[6] But his messianism, like that of Schoenberg and Boulez, simply hasn't worked out—the music never caught on, neither grabbing a multitude of performers, nor intriguing enough ears to sell tickets.

All of this seems to have dawned on Schuller by 1978, as expressed in a lecture delivered at Goucher College. He begins by stating that "it must seem to be obvious to everyone that what we call 'contemporary music'… has failed to capture the sustained interest of either lay audiences or professional performers; in fact, it has encountered a stone wall of resistance and apathy."[7] He observes that the music seems to communicate to no one, that not even the new generation has picked it up, and that over time, it is the audience who finally decides what lasts. Schuller thought that some music would have to wait the requisite thirty years before being accepted, and recognizes this may not be the case. He specifically mentions Schoenberg, Webern, and Ives. (Actually, he is a little off the mark in this; audiences and musicians clearly have established pre-serial Schoenberg, some Webern, and certainly Ives as at least centrally tangential to the ongoing tradition. As I write this, Leonard Slatkin and the Detroit Symphony Orchestra have just performed all four Ives symphonies on one program at Carnegie Hall!) Be that as it may, with a nod to neoromanticism Schuller then does the important job of deciphering what has transpired in the last seventy years. It is a true baring of the soul.

Schuller describes the rush to newness at the turn of the twentieth century—think Debussy's *Jeux* and Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* as examples—with the retreat into neoclassicism of the 1920s and headlong plunge into the avant-garde of the 1940s and 1950s. He notes that the innovations of the twenties were taken up again—this time with a vengeance. "[V]ast new vistas were opened up, unheard of new freedoms were perceived and virtually no controls or predeterminations were exercised….[W]e regarded all of these changes and gains as positive…but there was almost

[6]Ibid.

[7]Schuller, "Toward a New Classicism?" in *Musings*, 174.

no questioning of where we were going at such headlong speeds, and whether in fact we were looking at gains or losses."[8] This is quite a thing for an avant-garde composer to admit. Neither Karlheinz Stockhausen nor Boulez has ever uttered such a statement. Ligeti, to his honor, did so, stating, "I am an enemy of ideologies in the arts," as did George Rochberg: "All human gestures are available to all human beings at any time."[9]

For Schuller it all comes down to a matter of *freedom without control*. He says that there were more losses than gains, that even the gains weren't under control or mastery, and that they were more technical than substantive. Composers were seduced into notions of complexity and intellectualism for their own sake, and were taught that writing music is a technical matter, not an emotional, spiritual, or cultural one. But if one wished to push the boundaries of comprehensibility, shouldn't there also have been a push to greater emotion, simplicity, and even humanity? Like Rochberg, Schuller notes that it makes no sense to suggest that to accept something new one must totally reject the objects and lessons of the past. He even says "we lost the whole meaning and usage of melody and theme," and that writing a good one just isn't as easy as it might seem.[10]

Schuller notes the same problem in that exalted realm of harmony, "that wonderful mysterious thing that enables us in diatonic music to go from major to minor….We lost the ability to deal in bright or dark harmonies—insofar as we thought about harmonies at all."[11] Repetition wasn't allowed and, most grievous, neither was recognizable form. In summary, Schuller notes the doctrinaire and unyielding nature of the philosophical posture. No mixing of tonality and atonality was allowed; exceptions became the norm; and immediacy, accessibility, memorability, directness, and simplicity were all considered banal, and thus unusable. These were, of course, the principles of the European New Music dogma, propounded by Boulez, Stockhausen et al., of the 1950s to 1980s.

And finally, Schuller asks that composers return to the task in which all of the great masters engaged: to use and coordinate all of the elements of music fully. The goal of composition should remain as it has long been: to make

[8]Ibid., 178.

[9]Ligeti quote cited in "Schott Music Mourns for György Ligeti," Schott Music, June 12, 2006, http://www.schott-music.com/news/archive/show,74.html. Rochberg quote cited in "George Rochberg," Theodore Presser Company, http://www.presser.com/Composers/info.cfm?Name=GEORGEROCHBERG.

[10]Schuller, "Toward a New Classicism?" 179.

[11]Ibid.

music that elicits an emotional reaction, from goose bumps to tears. This cannot be accomplished through a shedding of all that we have experienced and learned over the last century, but rather by balancing the old with the new, the traditional with the experimental, and that which make us truly human, the emotions and the intellect.

This task must be undertaken by each composer, with the hope that someone will succeed. Perhaps Schuller's music might lead us to this blessed place. Maybe his compositions, like *Seven Studies on Themes of Paul Klee*, will survive the brutality of time and judgment—the many performances of which, as a utopian modernist, he decried, while pondering why his hardcore twelve-tone works were not performed. Schuller seems to have answered this question during the course of his maturation.

More than most, from his wide and multivarious experience, Gunther Schuller knows that music is the most unforgiving of all of the arts. What was his goal for his opera *The Visitation*? It was not to produce a radical or avant-garde work, but rather to create "a singable repertory opera that does not compromise stylistically."[12] Despite all of his pretensions to diversity, and ideas of all musics being equal, Schuller is clearly holding himself to the standard of the repertoire, that sacred canon to which some pieces belong and some do not. The verdict is still out on his music, and we shall have to wait and see how it is ultimately judged.

Schuller has won just about every award there is and strutted across many of the world's most important stages—literally and figuratively. He has tremendous energy and has contributed greatly to the musical scene throughout his long life. We should be grateful for his contribution, and his candor.

[12]Schuller, "Concerning My Opera *The Visitation*," in *Musings*, 234.