

MNM: A Collective Love Letter by and to Musicians

MNM : une lettre d'amour collective par et pour les musiciens

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Article abstract

Culver presents his observations and reactions to the first MNM Festival, and then opens the suggestion box with his views on the steps MNM should take to solidify its survival and relevancy. Finally, he compares the festival to its potential place in the history of culture, technology and music since Monteverdi/Gutenberg through Cage/McLuhan and into the future.

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MNM: A Collective Love Letter by and to Musicians

Andrew Culver

Arts festivals are a mutated genus. Some are specialist, some generalist. Some are surveys, some celebrate a niche. Some promote an aesthetic, some a person, some tourism. Some are creator oriented, some performer oriented. Some are multi-disciplinary, some inter-disciplinary, some mono-disciplinary. Some are commercial ventures, some commercially unviable.

MNM could be any of these

I'll give my take on MNM: somewhat more specialist than generalist; not focused enough to be celebration, not broad enough to be survey; noticeable yet relatively open-minded aesthetic point of view, near zero touristic benefit; perfectly balanced between creator and performer emphasis; inevitably mono-disciplinary with some but perhaps not enough inter-media; decidedly non-profit but not wholly non-commercial.

Most of this is a mixed bag

If you think of the most durable artistic festivals, many tend to have settled into a well-focused self-definition. Salzburg is about a Great Musical Culture: you go there and get to feel that, in another time and place, you yourself might well have been educated, rich and aristocratic enough to have subsidized Mozart. The Venice Biennale is about world trade: it's a bazaar-like survey of far-flung artistic wares. Stratford is the ultimate celebration: one unified artistic universe rich enough for a lifetime's devotion. Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) presents one simple aesthetic: it's new, it's cool, it's you-got-to-know. The [blank] Film Festival is mono-disciplinary and invariably has one economic purpose: tourism. Edinburgh is the festival's festival, the festival-goers' festival, and festival director's festival.

A festival's well-focused self-definition can be its greatest asset if it's well-understood and well-communicated to the world. According to my pocket analysis, MNM's clearest strength is the equality of emphasis between creators and performers. Given Montreal's extraordinarily positive environment for musicians and composers, especially young and experimental musicians, this is good and right.

In addition, the culture of Montreal has a nice way of celebrating local and global artistic efforts with equal enthusiasm. And the flip side is also true: the world has a positive and not-well-understood, in a positive way, sense that Montreal offers a welcoming, interesting and mixed culture. Somewhere in those complementary realities another potential festival asset lies: universality.

The Suggestion Box is Opened

MNM can and should be **the** universal new music festival, pursuing two complementary aspirations: local to the world, global to the locals.

How is this possible? Here's how MNM can do it:

- Keep the first core principle: equal emphasis between composers and performers. This equality forces the best possible common ground, which is, simply put, the love of keeping music-making alive. This is the aesthetic equivalent of a well-balanced diet, exercise and stress-management program.
- Keep the first core asset: Montrealers. They know that there is a lot to like in Montreal and most everywhere else too. Do what works for them and others will notice.

Out of these two will grow the trick that makes MNM uniquely valuable to the world. This trick will define MNM — so that it's promotable — and give it strength — so that it's necessary.

Here are some specific suggestions:

1. Narrow the historical plain and widen the geographical plain. Avoid survey, promote future. Avoid bi-polar axis (for example, Quebec-France, or Canada-Europe), promote circus (global simultaneity).
2. Build community. Bar.
3. Commercialize. Get a capitalist-created side business, like media, clothing, books, TV, talk shows...
4. Get a festival home, not for staging all events, but as the base-station of a treasure hunt. Share it with other festivals. Make it round (of course).
5. Advertise globally. Advertise locally. Alliances. Advertise a lot.

The History of Music, Part MNM-2003

The cultural parameters that determine all human interactions experience occasional seismic shifts that historians come to see, pretty much universally, as the beginnings and endings of historical periods. We're just emerging from one now.

Every few years I try to put a finer point on where we are, and it's been a few years, so I'm overdue, so here it is.

Marshal McLuhan remains the sharpest observer of the essential nature of our own seismic historical shift: technology. Technology certainly played a part in all previous era-changing times, but in our era-changing time, and probably the previous, it is the major player. In a nutshell, McLuhan says:

With the invention by Gutenberg of the printing press—around 1600—and its rapid spread thereafter, the dissemination of information was immediately decentralized, from the nearly exclusive prerogative of the Church through its scribes, to a multiplicity of commercial ventures.

The economics of scribing had a very, very high entry bar: you needed a large centralized organization; a large number of highly trained and devoted craftsmen; a business plan that gathered money, goods and services from a willing population and distributed to a large network of branch offices; and a widely distributed network of production facilities and retail outlets (monasteries and churches) most of which had taken literally hundreds of years to build.

The post-Gutenberg economics of information distribution had a much lower entry bar: you needed a press, a building in which to house it, and a small cadre of people to operate the type-casting, type-setting, and the press, and to manage the business and effect local distribution of the products. You also needed one new thing: commercial writers.

With this shift the nexus of power was subdivided, from a single centralized Church, to a multitude of writers and press owners. It caused a slew of newborn realities, including: the commercial class, industrialization, the education system, rapid communication systems, rapid transportation of goods and people, corporations, and a vast expansion of democracy, capitalism, and commercialized culture. Also birthed were second-level new realities, side-effects of combinations of those just listed. The most important second-level new reality was the institutionalization of technological innovation (combination of the education system, industrialization and capitalism). The most important third-level new reality was mass culture / mass media (combination of technology, commercialized culture, and capitalism).

Technology is also the key component of the shift into post-Gutenberg reality, the shift we have all been living. The beginning was the invention of electricity, then electronics, telephone, film, radio, television, and the computer. These components of

mass electronic media are the subjects of McLuhan's most important thinking. What McLuhan did not live to see was the final stage of the transition, the Internet.

The Internet is a shift-ending reality because of the direct way it answers the questions posed by the beginning of the period that it is closing. We have to go back to Gutenberg and to its principle effect: decentralization of information distribution. None of the new media technologies affects increased information distribution, except the Internet. (Capitalism – through the dot-bomb object lesson – has acknowledged this distinction.)

Music

When it comes to recent music history, James Tenney puts a finer timeline on it: 1607-1951.

The first is the year of Monteverdi's *Orfeo*, generally acknowledged as the first modern opera. Basically, Monteverdi enhanced the vocal line's expressive capability while enhancing the orchestra's supportive techniques to bring about a pronounced shift, from an experience of spiritual complexity to one of emotional accessibility. (Sounds familiar, doesn't it? In some ways, the legacy of this shift has been to relive it periodically.)

The style Monteverdi introduced—and the simpler, more expressive art it allowed—was in perfect sync with the new post-Gutenberg social realities previously mentioned.

Tenney's end year, 1951, is the year of John Cage's *The Music of Changes*. I would add 1952, the year of Cage's *4'33"*: 1607–1951/2.

The new artistic realities that came about after Gutenberg/Monteverdi include: democratization (of subject matter); commercialization and capitalism (publishing and promotion); new, mostly bigger forms and the structures to support them (the novel, sonata form); and of course technology (new means of expression and distribution). New second-level realities include collage, cinema, and real-time vs. recorded-time.

To understand why Cage's two works mark the end of this period we go back once more to the beginning. The printing press had a vast cultural effect, but it actually did one and only one thing: it blew the lid off the production of paper documents. Cage had a very close relationship with his publisher, and he produced a huge body of publishable musical documents. But Cage loved paper itself, working on it, feeling it, looking at the original. He loved printmaking, and he loved the work of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, two contemporaries whose work acknowledges and respects the cosmopolitan, anarchic interpenetration of light and reflections with surfaces, marks and attachments. This set his appreciation of paper in opposition to the

mass-reproduction of the printing press. Cage, in other words, though he used publishing, was not thinking like a publisher.

Neither was he thinking like a democrat, a capitalist, commercialist or industrialist. Cage was making art outside of the side-effects of Gutenberg. Even his use of technology, which we might think linked him inexorably to the Gutenberg Galaxy, set him apart: it was not a means of expression and propagation; it was a tool of enlightenment, used never as necessity or convenience, only as a source of surprise and subversion.

Finally and most directly, Cage was not thinking like Monteverdi. He had no interest in expression – emotional, self, or otherwise. He was socially, politically, economically, and artistically ready for a post-opera, post-movie, post-novel world.

The Music of Changes was the first composition to which Cage applied disciplined chance operations to all aspects. With chance usurping choice in every possible locale, expression becomes impossible. The title draws attention. But in every other way, the work is conventional to its milieu: it is for the piano, is virtuosic, is of major-work proportions, is traditionally notated, published and copyrighted, and it is performed in a traditional setting.

For several years before and while writing *The Music of Changes*, Cage was coming to terms with a concept for a piece with no notated sounds. The culmination was the premiere of *4'33"* the following year. This work takes the absence of expressivity beyond the borders of the composition, right into the active mind of the listener.

These two works are essential partners. Between them they demonstrate conclusively—the one subversively, the other overtly—the end of the Monteverdi Galaxy.

MNM and Music History

In the post-Cage era, some composers are in a bind. When you are bound to self-expression, and self-expression itself is unwanted, frustration results. Frustration is, of course, highly-expressible.

I did not feel any frustration from the MNM musicians at all, but I did find it noticeably in the work of too many composers. It even had a theme, a machine-gun "ra-ta-tat-tat-tat-tat", often in the brass.

There are three problems with this that are directly detrimental to MNM. This is not an aesthetic stance, but a practical one.

The first is the datedness of expressivity, with its concomitant self-absorption, single-mindedness and narrowness of focus—as opposed to surround of acceptance and interpenetration. The second is that frustration is a black emotion. And the third is the hierarchical and centralized social message in opposition to the times. Each of these is a turn-off for the public MNM will need.

MNM is conceived and managed by composers. They will need to take a compositional approach to solving this problem, assuming they have the compositional skills to work non-expressively. Or, they will need to bring composers who do, or run the risk of bringing in managers who are not composers, who neither have the desire nor the skills to be expressive, but who have demonstrated an instinct in sync with the times.

The compositional approach is to embrace multiplicity, contradiction, and interpenetration. To select venues, works, musicians, composers, and special events through a process that generates surprise, welcome and a sense of surround.

To compose, in effect, a musicircus.

Good luck to all – Andrew Culver