

# **Project-based programming and season programming : what is at stake ?**

On the Website of the organisation Carrefour jeunesse-emploi Montréal, a statement caught my attention. It indicates that :

The complex path of the youth on the artistic job market implies two different processes. To simplify each of them, let's say that performers seek to get into the job market as individuals and therefore work on their employability. Creators, with their artistic projects, focus more on entrepreneurship. Performers seek contracts; creators seek the development of their projects<sup>1</sup>.

What strikes me is that this situation seems to correspond well with the majority of fields, except that of new music, where the picture is inverted. In this case, it is the performers that gather and develop concert seasons as entrepreneurs whereas the composers seek to get into the job market as individuals looking for commission contracts.

My talk aims to describe the causes of this inversion, to identify its impacts, and give some possible solutions for a better balance. In order to do that, I will compare two production models, the project-based programming and the season programming.

Season programming is, by far, the most common model in the concert music scene in Quebec. Most of the time, this assumes the « self-presenting » model for a group of performers in their city of residence. The group may be incorporated as an organisation, or assigned to an organisation that hires them on a regular basis. In both cases, this organisation acts both as a producer and a presenter. This model thus consists of planning altogether many different concert programs, each of which are constituted of works by many different composers. The artistic conception, in the case of new music, is then delegated as subcontracting to composers and amalgamated by the piece.

Parallel to that, there is almost no existing production company developing creation projects on a « project by project » basis, providing itself ad hoc production means, and then selling these projects to presenters, as we see in dance, for example. Eventually, this approach could contribute in the redefinition of the role of the protagonists according to each distinct – although interrelated – steps that are conception, production and presentation. This distinction would lead to greater efficiency of each protagonist and to a better understanding and acknowledgement of their work. More than everything, project-based programming implies that the artistic project is at the heart of the preoccupations of all the participants, including the medias and the public.

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<sup>1</sup> Carrefour jeunesse-emploi de Montréal : [http://cjemontreal.org/fr/approche\\_et\\_expertise.html](http://cjemontreal.org/fr/approche_et_expertise.html) (consulted january 3<sup>rd</sup> 2013). Traduction by the author.

## An historic perspective

Up to the beginning of the 20th century, composers seemed to be walking along the path of their professional emancipation, a path that would lead them to become free entrepreneurs developing creation projects. Wagner is at the time the first musician to adopt the model of conceptor-producer. Yet, this process is interrupted and give way to institutionalised conservatism. It is during this period that institutions specialized in the art of the past begin to appear. For most of them, this « museum-driven » direction emerges only slowly, insidiously, by the simple fact of their immobilism. In Quebec, even though institutions dedicated to new music appeared subsequently, none has the power or money of the large orchestras and opera houses which, notwithstanding, don't give much attention to our national heritage – past and to come.

Some examples coming from Canada are relevant of that. Macleans magazine recently published an article indicating that : « In 2018, after a decade under Mr. Neef, the COC [Canadian Opera Company] will have received around \$20 million through the Canada Council, and the only new Canadian music heard on the COC's mainstage will have been by Rufus Wainwright<sup>2</sup>. » Even worst, new symphony orchestras keep on developing themselves with the same mentality – like the Orchestre Métropolitain in Montreal, for instance, doing just the same as the Montreal Symphony Orchestra. In Toronto, Micheline Roi, writes :

The least inventive art by far is the work that relies on large cultural institutions for expression : the orchestras, ensembles, and operas. [...] In a milieu that relies on public money to survive, these ensembles are our one per cent. Their size requires the most resources to maintain and the depth of their tradition dictates what is possible in new music<sup>3</sup>.

These institutions are the ones that developed the model of season programming. Large ensembles, to ensure their cohesion, need to rehearse regularly and with the same members. They require a large hall for their concerts and touring is very costly. Most of all, they don't need creators ; so, instead of becoming creation-production organisations, they become production-presentation organisations. Their model is this :

- to be an ensemble of performers;
- to produce concerts in self-presentation in the city of residence;
- to have a concert season in that city.

When the Société de musique contemporaine du Québec (SMCQ) came to life in 1966, it adopted this model of season programming, even though it is run by composers for composers. The foundation of SMCQ is followed by those of the Association pour la création et la recherche

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<sup>2</sup> « Alexander Neef's eyes are trained on Europe, not his own country », *macleans.ca*, 5 janvier 2014, <http://www2.macleans.ca/2014/01/05/bramwell-tovey/#.Usmeep4QLpg.facebook> (consulted january 5<sup>th</sup> 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Micheline Roi, « Change is coming. You can hear it in the streets. », *Musicworks*, n° 113, spring 2012, p. 5.

électroacoustiques du Québec (1978) and the Productions SuperMusique (1979). However, in the middle of the 1980's, no other durable structure has been added. In the absence of specialized presenters<sup>4</sup> – to buy new music concerts and promote them – and of initiatives by composers – to create companies and hire artisans – the performers gathered in ensembles. Starting from 1987, they appear at the pace of one each year. In 2011, they numbered approximately twenty. In 2014, I dare say we can't count them anymore... Commissioning, put in place to encourage old orchestras to occasionally use composers without having to pay a dime, is an established system. In this system, organisations consolidate their financing while composers remain freelancers.

## **An ambiguity with serious consequences**

The incorporation of musical ensembles as production-presentation organisations accentuates the fragility of an ecosystem developing itself as a monoculture on the structural level. The lack of complementarity between organisations leads to the fragmentation of the efforts of these same organisations who have to do everything themselves, from artistic direction to tickets sale. Musicians become, by default, cultural educators, media liaison, administrators, in short : they take upon themselves all of these functions that have not been integrated holistically with the evolution of the artistic practice. What is more, organisations generate an endless stream of new works without any structure being dedicated to take over and ensure proper dissemination of the most significant of these works after their first – and often last – performance.

Nevertheless, the quick production cycle that characterises the season programming offers advantages for the evolution of the practice that have contributed to its popularity, notably that of allowing a large number of musicians – composers included – to learn and refine their craft. Focused on proliferation, this system favors artistic risk and the diffusion of specialized knowledges ; but are these considerations – linked to professional development – the ones that should invariably be presented on stage ? For example, the concert programs that string together many works from different composers, at the expense of aesthetic continuity, give the impression of a colloquium of insiders presenting the current state of the musical research, rather than that of an artistic achievement. The public feels this. How can we blame them for not being interested in a perpetual experimental workshop ?

The ambiguity between the functions of producers and presenters largely causes this problem. These organisations, most of the time, are open to all aesthetic approaches, or at least to a large range. But, many organisations open to all aesthetics, this quickly leads to artistic nonsense – in the literal meaning. Normally, this openness should characterise presenters promoting a variety of productions that distinguishes themselves by a strong artistic statement. Presently, the scattering of works isolate them from fundamental *raison d'être*, their reason for being. As a result, the public has no point of reference and can't develop a culture of new music.

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<sup>4</sup> With exception of the Festival international de musique actuelle de Victoriaville (1983).

## **The positioning of new music**

In Quebec, in 1994, we had a polemic through a series of open letters<sup>5</sup> from different people about the supposed hermeticism of new music. The argument, however, was essentially « you can't see the forest for the trees ». We have to question ourselves about the importance of new music for the community, and that questioning should not be reduced in terms of « popularity » or « accessibility ». Few people reads poetry ; but poetry is held in high esteem, it is studied, preserved. What do we hope, precisely, for new music ? That it fills halls ? That it endures ? That it travels abroad ? We have to think about the positioning of new music ; set the ends, then provide the means.

Some participants in this polemic insisted on the fact that new music was a universe in itself inside of which multiple aesthetics could be found. That is an interesting clue. Presently, nothing allows the potential listener to discern these aesthetics. For example, we, as professionals in the field, should distinguish two types of concert and give each one a different approach.

On one hand, there would be the concert with high artistic risk, which is an opportunity for discovery and experimentation for the composer, the listener and the performer. This concert can be cheaper to produce, be handled quite simply in self-presentation in front of a small audience without anybody having to feel uncomfortable with that. This is not hermeticism, it is a required laboratory for the evolution of the practice. Some organisations, mostly ensembles and presenters, can even specialize in this kind of event and actually develop a customer base for it. Sometimes, the risk may come from the fact that we present highly important repertoire, but that we know will not appeal to large audiences. Again, this is not elitism ; to avoid these issues by simply assuming that everybody should naturally enjoy what we are enjoying the same way we do, is the real elitism.

On the other hand, there would be the concert for which we already know the content, stemming from an elaborate artistic conception, designed to reach large audiences, especially by touring, beneficiating from a more important promotion through the medias with more money being invested accordingly. Normally, we can't have both advantages at the same time : pure experimentation and artistic achievement. At best, you can be able to sell one or the other ; but it seems impossible to succeed by persisting on presenting a confused mix of the two.

## **The public funding of conception, production and presentation activities**

The issue of new music positioning naturally leads to that of public funding. As I explained earlier, self-presentation causes certain problems for the recognition of new music. Despite this, performers are both simultaneously confined and encouraged to produce their concerts this way by the Canada Council for the Arts (CCA) and the other federal sponsors. I will give three short examples of that.

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<sup>5</sup> Gathered in *Circuit*, vol.7, no<sup>o</sup> 1, Montréal, PUM, 1996.

Firstly, two funding programs devoted to international touring, Trade Routes and ProMart, were cancelled by a decision of the Canadian government in 2008. This obviously encourages self-presentation in the city of residence.

Secondly, at CCA, the program called « New music program : Project Grants » accepts the following projects : « self-produced events in the applicant's city or town of residence » and « for ensembles or performing groups, rehearsals in preparation for a particular event, as well as rehearsals to incorporate new works into their repertoire<sup>6</sup>. » Even in the case of this « project » program, we recognize the description of the season programming model, definitely oriented toward the performers.

Thirdly, still at CCA, the description of the program called « Music, Production Grants » reads as follows : « Concert production provides support to professional Canadian musicians and professional groups/ensembles that wish to self-produce events of artistically-driven music in their local area<sup>7</sup>. » This program is only open to performer groups, and not to simple... producers ! One could think that this program helping performers in self-presentation in their city of residence is necessary because there is no other programs for them. But then we find these programs : « Grants to Professional Choirs », « Grants to Professional Orchestras », « Project Grants to Professional Choirs » and « Project Grants to Professional Orchestras ». So there are specific programs for choirs, but none to something as simple as... producers. This kind of financing thus encourages the entrepreneurship of performers and discourages that of composers.

And yet, the situation could be clarified simply by not making distinction between different kinds of producers. That is what the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec (CALQ) is doing, rather by making a clear distinction between the artist grants (conception), the funding to producers and the funding to specialized presenters. These categories are based on what you do rather than who you are, regardless of the artistic field. Even better, producers can ask for money to pay for conception fees, like for paying a composer (why not ?). CALQ even describes these organisations as « *Creation* and production organisations<sup>8</sup> ». However, in Quebec, no new music producer, or almost none, is paying for the conception of the musical content it presents. No producer in new music is devoting a significant part of its budget to creation... Why should they ? There are commission grants. Commission grants are the consequence of producers adopting the season programming, while research-creation grants can be related to project-based programming. The organisations that have season programs need content ; they access it by externalizing the cost. The composer, who is the very heart of this system of production, becomes the only one link that we can hire without financial compensation, and it is the system that

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<sup>6</sup> <http://canadacouncil.ca/en/council/grants/find-a-grant/grants/new-music-project-grants> (consulted january 27<sup>th</sup> 2014).

<sup>7</sup> <http://canadacouncil.ca/en/council/grants/find-a-grant/grants/music-production-grants> (consulted january 27<sup>th</sup> 2014).

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.calq.gouv.qc.ca/organismes/fonc\\_musique.htm](http://www.calq.gouv.qc.ca/organismes/fonc_musique.htm) (consulted december 2<sup>nd</sup> 2013).

supports this. The system should rather be made so that production companies are encouraged to devote a large part of their budget to conception.

## **A lack of equity**

The present situation creates a lack of equity between generations in that freelance composers, using the system of commissions, don't experience the same economic reality as incorporated performers. These performers benefit from better stability by being able to hire themselves and, eventually, to pay themselves directly from ongoing financing. If everything goes well for them, as the years go by, their funding will likely be secured, if not improved. What is more, these performers still enjoy the possibility of being hired as freelancers. Composers only have freelancing. The evaluation by competition they constantly have to face has the benefit of giving emerging artists the opportunity to get some funding and to develop their expertise. The fact is that more and more composers are incorporating themselves, notably to be able to submit both to artist grants and to organisation's funding. The situation then becomes doubly frustrating for them : not only do established organisations monopolize the production financing, but they also don't use it to guarantee creators minimal professional conditions – they rather submit a commission grant, and cross their fingers before washing their hands.

Young organisations can't hope to receive as much funding as old ones, ever. If the budgets of the arts councils were increasing, this curve would be legitimate. In a context of stagnant budgets, a status quo is created that slows innovation by not allowing the younger generation to contribute to the development of the art adequately. Let's put it this way : no producer can have such mediocre proposals that he should receive 0\$ while his colleague born earlier receives 50 000 \$ recurrently. No producer is 50 000 % less competent so that his project should kept on being refused year after year while his colleague gets whole seasons financed altogether, year after year. More projet-based programming would lead to better equity and would help mend the cyclical imbalance that afflicts us. Let's remember that the on-going funding devoted to institutions, whether they be universities, art centers, organisations proposing residencies, workshops, call for works, etc, is money that is no longer available to support the free entrepreneurship of new blood in the creator-producer-presenter chain – an ensemble developing a workshop for composers actually enhancing his own on-going financing while creating a new opportunity for composers to freelance for free. In other words, we can't complain about getting always the same result if we don't make room for change at the level of the ecosystem.

## **A solution model : the artistic project as starting point**

In regard to the project-based programming, we can look at a range of successful artists in a variety of fields such as composer Jean-François Laporte, director Robert Lepage and choreographer Marie Chouinard. What is their goal ? To reach excellence by allowing the content to find both its natural development process as well as its final form. Spontaneously, and without any contradiction, the aesthetic project becomes the brand image of their company. This remains

unrealizable for any organisation that does not have as its mandate a form of artistic signature, or, more simply, for any organisation that does not present the work of only one artist, or only one small group of artists sharing similar aesthetics.

Project-based programming could have a snowball effect. The time and money devoted to conception would allow for a real creative process for the artist, including the creation of promotional material which would help generate interest in the project by presenters, the media and the public. This would clearly help make the project more profitable, and amortize costs. Touring justifies more rehearsal time and makes the quality of the performance that much better. Productions created as concert-pieces can facilitate – if not stimulate – the use of unusual instrumentations, scordaturas, stage arrangement, equipment, etc. As for the performers involved, they would find themselves in the same boat as most part of the artisans of all other artistic field, without a fixed income. However, they are relieved of the responsibilities related to administration, audience development, etc.

The conception/production/presentation chain appears clearly :

- Conception : related to an artist (or collective) creating content, directed or not by an artistic director (or committee). Creators have interest in incorporating themselves in order to produce their own work. If not, they can be hired by a producer or sell a turnkey product.
- Production : related to an organisation (or an individual, or a collective) that hires performers and technicians, rents equipment (and, if needed, a concert hall), oversees rehearsals, etc, so that an artistic project is ready to be presented to the public. In order to acquire original artistic content, the producer may hire staff creators or buy a turnkey content (no need for commissions, and composer's get paid all the time).
- Presentation : related to an organisation which buys concerts and presents them to the public (in a hall that is rented by or assigned to that organisation). The presenter is thus responsible for the audience development, the promotion and the ticket sales.

In 1960, Edgard Varèse stated : « Don't call tradition forty years of bad habits<sup>9</sup> ! ». I think this applies to the present situation. In fact, parallel to the traditional concert formula, new music's role of the artistic laboratory with an alternative repertoire has to move in another direction in order to inspire more than it does now, as an autonomous art form. « Rethinking the concert » does not necessarily imply its dilution in the multi-sauce (multi-disciplinary, multi-media...), which often contributes more to filling a hall on a given night than to the lasting recognition of music as a stand-alone art form.

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<sup>9</sup> Edgar Varèse, *Écrits*, Christian Bourgois Éditeur, 1983, Paris, p.161. Traduction by the author.