Interview

Threatening the Composer

An interview with Matthew Shlomowitz

Matthew Shlomowitz • Photo © Ash Sealy

Once again, I spot the lively gait of Matthew Shlomowitz walking towards me on a busy London road. Over the past year, I've come to know him better thanks to several shared projects. Behind the composer, co-director of the Plus-Minus Ensemble, and co-host of the Soundmaking podcast lies a supportive and passionate personality, one that cannot be contained within the limits of the body and the mind; his personality naturally spills over into the outer world of music, art, and ideas. While not a utopian, Shlomowitz passionately advocates for a healthier and more diverse community for both musicians and music-lovers.

*Last year, Shlomowitz's presence at the mecca of new music—the Darmstädter Ferienkurse—was much felt and appreciated. The festival witnessed two premieres of his new co-authored works: "Minor Characters" (written with composer-vocalist **Jennifer Walshe**), and "6 Scenes*

for Turntables and Orchestra" (written with composer-turntablist Mariam Rezaei). His lecture critiquing the idea of a consistent and uniform compositional voice as the sole model of music-making was equally well received.

And so, after fueling up on pastel de nata and a coffee, we went for a walk in a 19th- century cemetery to discuss co-composition, the role of artistic voice, and his allergic reaction to Romanticism and its values—values that continue to cast a shadow on us.

VAN: Last year, you had two major co-authored works premiered at Darmstadt. In the past decades, new music has increasingly been working out the relationship between composers and performers, but collaborations involving multiple composers are still rare. How did these pieces come to be?

Matthew Shlomowitz: The commission for "Minor Characters" came from Ensemble Nikel. The commission for "6 Scenes for Turntables and Orchestra" came from Radical Connectors—an informal network of institutions such as the Darmstadt Summer Courses, Ictus, and Ny Musikk, that are looking for new energies and approaches to new music for large forces. While I agree that single-authored composition continues to dominate, these projects suggest an emerging appetite for other models. It was natural in the sense that Jenny [Walshe], Mariam [Rezaei], and I have experience working with other makers, although two composers working together does have a specific quality that is different to a composer working with, for example, an improviser or choreographer.

What was your motivation for writing these co-authored pieces, and why do you think new music remains a single-authored territory?

For all the reactions against Romanticism in the 20th century, the image of the solitary composer on top of a mountain largely persists. I don't dismiss the value of encountering an individual's statement in an artwork, but I do think collaborative models equally offer another potential. I imagine some artists seek common ground in collaborations; I like the differences. Mariam's music is typically wild, intense, and bodily. Unlike my music, her work usually eschews chord progressions, melodies, and forms with refrains. In our first session on the piece, we imagined Mariam doing her "thing" surrounded by my "Disney"-direction orchestral music. I love pieces that involve aesthetic collisions, and co-authored work is a good way of getting at that. Another motivation was that I see my limits in terms of skills and temperament, and can feel boxed in and bored of myself.

How did you separate responsibilities, and what was the creative process like?

In both cases, much of the work was done independently. I'd send Mariam or Jenny a MIDI version of something I'd made and they'd add their part. My job was to make something strong, but also give space and things to react on—I had no idea what would come back. Those surprises were a blast, like Jenny turning one piece into a song about the exorcism of an Irish nun. It worked the other way too, and Mariam also made a few requests, like wanting to use the "double juggle" turntable technique, so I made a scene with alternating chords. Larger level formal decisions were made together.

It seems that co-composition is gaining some institutional momentum now: Next February, you will be running the "Team Composition" program at the Impuls Academy in Graz, Austria, with violist Dimitrios Polisoidis. What do you hope the participants will get from the experience?

I want to explore different models for doing co-composition in a practical way. I hope the participants will surprise me with approaches I haven't imagined yet. If co-composition is going to become normalized, then we need to think about how to teach it. The idea of co-composing can be scary for composers as it lessens and even threatens our place, but if we think adaptively, I reckon we have skills and perspectives that can allow us to make meaningful contributions to collaborative projects.

At Darmstadt, you also gave a **lecture** about the role of artistic voice. What motivated you to critique the idea of cultivating a consistent and uniform compositional style as the sole model of music-making? Have you received any interesting reactions?

The talk considered the possibility that the emphasis we place on composers developing a voice might be unhelpful for making good pieces. I wanted to look at where cultivating a voice could positively lead—and what it might be missing. Beyond that, I find it a little annoying when artists say "my practice" or "my research," and I wanted to think through whether that annoyance might reflect something important. I have received some feedback on how I can tighten up my argument, and I have spoken with a few composers who seemed irritated by it. As careful as I am not to discredit sole-authored work, I can see why those invested in a Romantic conception of the artist would be defensive. But I have the sense that it is broadly in alignment with how many others are thinking.

Alongside your co-authored pieces, I saw the lecture as an attempt to shake up the enduring legacy of Romanticism in music. Why are you so eager to do that?

Because I hate **the cult of personality of maestro culture**; because Romanticism plus capitalism equals **artist-as-brand**; because the emphasis on the individual stops us from imagining other music-making models; because, while I love art that is touching, I am suspicious of the notion

that I am experiencing the authentic and sincere truth of the creator; because it annoys me when leftist artists working in institutions are not **union members**, and I blame Romantic notations of specialness for that; and because I find folks who clasp their hands before they bow ridiculous. Some of these I can defend intellectually, and others may reflect my (Australian) temperament.

Is there anything else you would like to see change on an institutional and a personal level in new music?

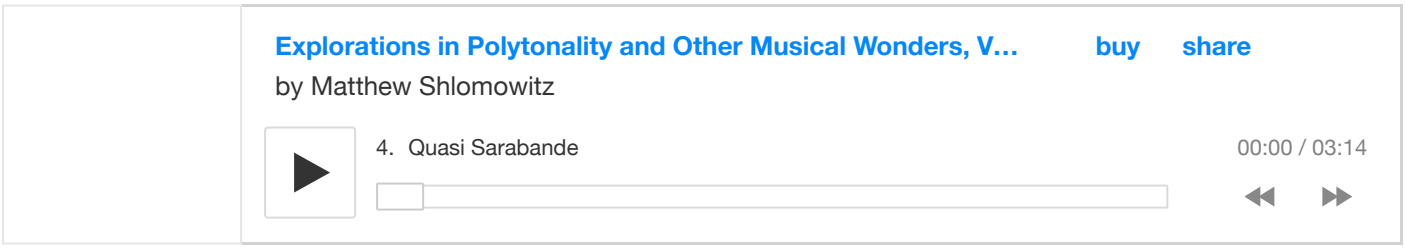
I see folks who want the scene to provide a utopian and insular space, offering an alternative to —or at least a break from—our late capitalist world by presenting intellectually challenging work that eschews fun, emotionality and, usually, tonality. Others want to broaden new music's relevance through artists making music that has a wider reach and programmers thinking about more fun, friendly and cool modes of presentation. I have sympathy for the former, not least that I want audiences to keep their phones in their pockets. But I am in the latter camp. While I am all for art receiving government subsidies, it feels uncomfortable when there are 50 people in the audience and the show cost €20,000. Making new music more culturally relevant is not an easy problem to solve, and I admire those throwing energy and imagination at the problem.

Yet by some measures new music is on the rise. According to **Bachtrack's listings** over the last decade, the percentage of new music on concert programs they surveyed has surged from approximately six to 14 percent. Do you think people are getting tired of listening to "classical" classical music?

I am not tired of it, but classical music in Europe has problems: the right is abandoning its commitment to state funding in the arts; the left attacks its white male history and elitism; audiences are getting older; and it has failed to maintain a living tradition. While programs often feature new and recent work, I rarely see stuff written between 1950 to 2000 being programmed, and so the repertory feels pretty closed. And the saddest part is that the loudest folks on social media advocating for classical music are often so defensive and irritating.

What are some of the positive developments in new music that have emerged during the last few decades?

Seeking gender balance among composers, performers and curators. The matter is not settled, but progress has been achieved. Beyond the ethics, the aesthetic and sociological benefit has been great. The endeavor to increase representation across class and race seems far more complex, and you see mistakes being made—but good folks are trying. More personally, I'd love a person unfamiliar with new music who is into interesting fiction, visual art, and pop music to get something out of my music. In the 1990s that was called selling out, and I am glad that many, including me (*ooft*!), have now moved on from that dumb view.



Recognizing change can be tricky when you're living through it. Your recent album, "Explorations in Polytonality and Other Musical Wonders, Volumes 2 and 4," offers such an experience, blending medieval, baroque, jazz and video game music, borrowing material freely from different times and idioms—while still sounding like you.

Yes, the surface features within and between the volumes are avowedly heterogeneous. There is nevertheless an underlying project at the heart of the "Explorations in Polytonality" series: an interest in creating short-form pieces that engage with nerdy theory elements, such as Scriabin's Mystic Chord, Mario Cadence, and hemiola, or forms and genres like 12-bar blues and the sarabande. It is "me" in each piece doing that engaging, so I am sure my skills, experience and

temperament are reflected. That's totally fine—my talk wasn't against that, but rather I wanted to suggest that explicitly codifying one voice could be unhelpful and limiting.

How have others "codified" your voice?

Most recently, someone described it as fruity, which I liked. ¶