



IT'S NOT ABOUT YOU: DO WE STILL NEED AN 'ARTISTIC VOICE'?

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Abstract: This article considers the possibility that the emphasis we place on composers developing an artistic voice might be unhelpful for making good pieces. I look at what constitutes an artistic voice and consider pros and cons for having a voice. As an alternative I examine strengths and weaknesses for being a capricious composer, which I define as a willingness to explore different compositional avenues without concern for constructing a consistent body of work. My objective is not to discredit composers who have a strong voice, but rather to loosen the grip of the single-voiced model that dominates the value system of new music.

Composers are encouraged to find their voice. In feedback on student compositions I have written 'a clear voice is emerging', writing those words as positive affirmation that the student is going in a good direction.¹ In this article I want to consider the possibility that the emphasis we place on composers developing a voice might be unhelpful for making good pieces. I will look at what constitutes an artistic voice and consider arguments for and against having a voice.

While the expression 'artistic voice' remains in circulation within mainstream discourse, it has been replaced by 'practice' within the more specialised discourses of fine art galleries and universities. I will discuss 'practice' later, but for now I want to signal that I see the terms as being largely synonymous.

The painter Kristy Gordon describes artistic voice as one's 'soul signature'. She writes: 'It brings together your personal experience, technical expertise, and epiphanies that come to you as you're working.'² In her book, *How to Find Your Artistic Voice: An Essential Guide to Working Your Creative Magic*, the visual artist Lisa Congdon writes:

Your artistic voice is your point of view as an artist. It includes your particular style... your skill, your subject matter, your medium, and the consistency with

¹ As Claire Taylor-Jay writes, 'composition students (particularly postgraduates) are often urged to "find their voice" in order to demonstrate their worth as composers, and it seems to be an unquestioned requirement of training in composition that it should facilitate development of a uniquely individual means of self-expression.' (Claire Taylor-Jay, 'The Composer's Voice? Compositional Style and Criteria of Value in Weill, Krenek and Stravinsky', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 134, no. 1 (2009), p. 86).

² Kristy Gordon, 'How I Found My Artistic Voice – And You Can, Too', *Realism Today*, 2022, <https://realismtoday.com/kristy-gordon-creativity-artistic-voice/#:~:text=Our%20artistic%20voice%20comes%20from,you%20as%20you're%20working> (accessed 1 September 2023).

which you use all of these things... It reflects your unique perspective, life experience, identity, and values, and it is a reflection of what matters to you.³

In her article, 'How to Find Your Artistic Voice and Why It's Important for Success', the visual artist Catherine McNally suggests that artists should

Think of your artistic style as your differentiator. It's why your followers choose you over similar copywriters, photographers, painters, musicians – you name it. Your voice sets you apart and, if you truly embrace it, can help you find and grow your niche audience.⁴

There are lots of shared notions across these definitions: 'unique perspective' and 'point of view'; 'technical expertise' and 'skill'; 'identity' and 'sets you apart'. There is, however, one important distinction. Congdon's definition reflects a romantic view. For her, the artist's goal is to reveal their unique perspective and experience in their art. Art is the expression of one's subjectivity and artistic truth is found through the impulse to look for truth inwardly.⁵ McNally's language is far more outward, capitalist and conscious of new media. Through words such as 'differentiator' and 'followers', she suggests that the prize in finding one's artistic voice is not truth, but rather competitive advantage.

Seth Brodsky's essay, 'There is No Such Thing as the Composer's Voice', offers a critical perspective on the connection between voice and capitalism.⁶ Brodsky considers statements that the film and concert music composer Ludovico Einaudi has made about voiceness and formalises his position as the 'Einaudi Rule': 'the composer's voice is whatever is not technique that is *also not* other voices'. Brodsky argues:

Unsurprisingly, Einaudi's Rule is hegemonic in the age of late neoliberal capitalism. The singular, the auratic, that which renders music logically closest to the unika of the hypercapitalist art world/market, is also what mobilizes its opposite: the endless whirl of exchangeable coin.⁷

There is more to unpack about the romantic notion of voice, with its emphasis on individualism, subjective experience and inward truth. Likewise, there is more to say about the voice as brand construction within capitalism. This article, however, is not a critical-theory-styled exposé that aims to reveal the hidden forces at play within romantic and capitalist logics. While I believe the concept of voice that pervades our scene is primarily understood in romantic and/or capitalist terms, I limit myself to the practical matter of whether a concept of voiceness might be unhelpful for making good pieces.

³ Lisa Congdon, *An Essential Guide by Lisa Congdon to Help You Find Your Artistic Voice* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2019), www.creativeboom.com/tips/how-to-find-your-artistic-voice-an-essential-guide-by-lisa-congdon-to-work-your-creative-magic/#:~:text=%22Your%20artistic%20voice%20is%20your,these%20things%2C%22%20adds%20Lisa (accessed 1 September 2023).

⁴ Catherine McNally, 'How to Find Your Artistic Voice and Why It's Important for Success', Medium, 2021, <https://medium.com/swlh/how-to-find-your-artistic-voice-and-why-its-important-for-success-2cd8a7b2ac4d#:~:text=Think%20of%20your%20artistic%20style,and%20grow%20your%20niche%20audience> (accessed 1 September 2023).

⁵ This position is widely held in classical music. As Taylor-Jay writes, 'the Romantic aesthetic of "voice", and the expectation that a composer will have a unique, individual style throughout her working life, is alive and well.' (Taylor-Jay, p. 111).

⁶ Seth Brodsky, 'There Is No Such Thing as the Composer's Voice', in *The Voice as Something More: Essays toward Materiality*, eds. Martha Feldman, and Judith T. Zeitlin (Chicago, IL, 2019; p. 232; online edition, Chicago Scholarship Online, 21 May 2020), <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226656427.003.0012> (accessed 1 September 2023).

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 232.

It seems to me that the means for achieving voiceness centres around two attributes: distinctiveness and consistency.⁸ Distinctiveness has been defined as ‘the quality of being easy to recognise because of being different from other things’.⁹ I imagine most instances of distinctiveness are when someone does something a little differently. For instance, a distinctive feature of the 1980s Australian rock band Hunters & Collectors is the appearance of the French horn in many of their songs. Within the context of new music, distinctiveness is strongly connected with innovation: composers distinguish themselves through offering new experiences for audiences. This is achieved through innovating new sounds, new ways of combining and organising sounds, new ways of thinking about the role of performers, new ways of thinking about the mode or context of presentation, and so on.

Innovation is not, however, the only value at play in new music. People extol other virtues: that piece sounded awesome, that piece was so touching, that piece was so technically impressive. Nonetheless, within the context of new music a high value is placed on newness; it is achieved through innovating and once it has been achieved a composer is on their way to having an artistic voice. This article does not address critiques of newness and progress or question whether innovation is an inherently desirable value; instead, it embraces the values of distinctiveness and innovation, with the important caveat that it argues for distinctive pieces not distinctive composers.

Consistency is the second attribute of voiceness. Consistency can be defined as ‘the quality of always behaving or performing in a similar way’.¹⁰ To fashion an artistic voice, a composer needs to do the distinctive thing that they have fashioned across several works. However, a composer can’t just do that thing; composers are criticised if they write more or less the same piece over and over. The perfect composer writes music with a high degree of similarity between pieces, counterpoised by a small but crucial degree of difference. Each piece should be recognisably a work by the said composer, but it should also explore and develop aspects of the compositional project the composer has set in train. This exploration leads to a degree of difference between pieces, which reflects an ongoing innovative process, the values of progress and taps into the notion of a personal artistic journey constructed in the romantic period, maintained and amplified by the values of capitalism.

While many would extol the attributes of distinctiveness and consistency in romantic terms, I want to consider whether these attributes are helpful for making good pieces. I see a compelling argument for the value of consistency, which I will term the Depth of Engagement Argument: by committing to a compositional project, a composer gets better at it over a series of pieces and finds new possibilities within that project that were not immediately apparent and that could have only been found through sustained focus.

⁸ Taylor-Jay puts it similarly when she writes, ‘An artist, it seems, is a true artist only if we can recognize her unique voice, and if that voice is consistent throughout her oeuvre.’ (Taylor-Jay, p. 86).

⁹ Cambridge Dictionary, s.v. ‘Distinctiveness’ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/distinctiveness> (accessed 3 September 2023).

¹⁰ Cambridge Dictionary, s.v. ‘Consistency’ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/consistency?q=consistency> (accessed 3 September 2023).

It is surely true that one can get better at things through repeated effort and that sustained engagement can lead to artistic depths that one could not find in a single work. These claims are easy to illustrate in relation to definable conceits such as composers dealing with polyrhythms, polytonality, algorithms or triggering psychoacoustic responses. It seems reasonable to suggest that composers will make more skilful and interesting works in these areas through sustained focus. It also holds for more specific musical features, such as an innovative tonal composer creating new types of cadential figures across a body of work. I am sure that the same is also true in less easily characterised cases. For example, while I cannot define the terms of the late work of Morton Feldman in a word or phrase, I think the consistency across his 1970s and 1980s works was productive. He found a special world and there was a lot to explore in it, making each piece special.

Having offered a strong argument for the value of composers being consistent, I will now consider whether there is merit in being a capricious composer and whether there are negative aspects to consistency. Capriciousness here can be contrasted with having a voice: it is the willingness to inhabit different idioms or styles and explore different compositional avenues, without concern for constructing a consistent body of work. I'll begin with two hypothetical examples.

Hypothetical example 1: Geoff

Geoff is composing a work that has four sections. Each section is two minutes long. Geoff's works typically feature equally proportioned sections. In this case, Geoff considers extending the second section by a factor of 12. Rather than an 8-minute work cast in four sections divided 2-2-2-2, it would become a 30-minute work divided 2-24-2-2. While Geoff finds this idea exciting, he rejects it. He concludes his artistic practice is not about weird structural proportions.

Hypothetical example 2: Deirdre

Deirdre writes atonal works cast in pointillistic textures that avoid a regular beat or sense of metre. She has the idea of introducing a samba drumbeat layer in the final section of an orchestral work to create an unexpected shift and new context for the pointillistic atonality. She finds this idea exciting but rejects it because she concludes that her work is pure and avoids idiomatic references.

We can imagine similar hypotheticals where composers reject major chords, scratch tones, auto-tune or palindromic forms because they are foreign to their practice. The composer places their sense of self above a compositional possibility that might make their work more interesting and better. Geoff's attachment to equally proportioned sections, and Deirdre's to a pure form pointillistic atonality, has limited their sense of adventure and led them to risk-averse positions. Taking risks does not always lead to good artistic results, but artistic risk-taking is a value to which I subscribe. One argument against voiceness then is that it has the negative consequence of making composers less adventurous.

I would like to spend a little longer with Geoff to consider in what other ways he might have addressed his dilemma. By choosing the 8-minute version Geoff may have not acted in the best interests of the piece. Possibly the 30-minute version would be better, in the sense that more people, including the composer, would give it greater worth. Additionally, more performers might play it, more directors of ensembles and festivals might programme it, more history books might be written about it. Faced with the dilemma, Geoff turned inward to think about what the work said about him and how it connected with his practice. He could have instead looked outward. He could have formed a focus group with a selection of people that

represented the constituency they were trying to impress and presented the two versions to see how members of the group evaluated and experienced each version. This could have helped him create the piece with the greatest worth, which seems just as reasonable an objective as self-expression. In literature, the idea of looking outwards for help is commonplace: novelists have editors and drafts of their work are typically read for comment by several professionals. Beyond their student years, new-music composers do not typically want or ask for help, which I think is a shame.

I have suggested that one reason composers might consider giving up attachment to voiceness is to become more adventurous within a piece. Another reason is to become more adventurous between pieces. Overly investing in one's sense of voice can inhibit freedom to explore different styles and idioms, and a curious composer who explores different idioms is surely in step with the pluralist and decentred nature of the contemporary world. I am not suggesting a postmodern approach here, where several styles and idioms appear in the same work in conversation with one another and styles function as signifiers. The postmodernist doesn't write surfer rock songs or Viennese waltzes, for example, but rather counterpoises them to collapse high and low culture distinctions and place notions of rawness, youthfulness, freedom and absence of responsibility in relation to dignity, bourgeois respectability and 'society'. The play of signs and stylistic hybridity of postmodernism reflects a constructive desire to engage with the world, but it also displays a temperament anxious to avoid purity, sincerity or conviction.

I want to propose a different approach that I think has emerged in the twenty-first century. In 2007, Jonathan Lethem asked 'what exactly is postmodernism, except modernism without the anxiety?',¹¹ and today I think our post-postmodern moment might be characterised as 'postmodernism without anxiety'. We are free to write surfer rock songs or Viennese waltzes and we can do it without irony. We can do it without reducing such idioms to signifiers and playing politics with style. We can do it with love and sincerity, so long as it's knowing. One potential advantage then of composing without voice is to make the most of this new freedom to explore a range of interests. We can also engage the values of new music while we do it, to experiment, innovate and do something distinctive within idioms. Experimentation with idiom is often achieved through drawing on techniques external to that idiom. Imagine a just intonation surfer rock song, or a Viennese waltz with a J Dilla rhythmic sensibility. I love this way of thinking but see two dangers which I will call the Creative Tourist Argument and the Anti-Absolute Freedom Argument.

The Creative Tourist Argument critiques the composer who capriciously moves between idioms on the grounds of the superficiality of their engagement with those idioms. Whereas a real composer skills up and dives deep, the creative tourist superficially tries out different styles and interests, reflecting a lack of commitment and sense of purpose. One way out of this problem is to commit to a project for a series of pieces to allow deep diving. There are many examples of composers and bands making substantial shifts in their artistic direction or terrific one-off albums in an idiom they are not associated with. Examples of musicians pivoting include The Beatles, Ruth

¹¹ Jonathan Lethem, *The Ecstasy of Influence*. *Harper's Magazine*, February (2007), pp. 59–71.

Crawford Seeger, Beyoncé, György Ligeti, Taylor Swift, Miles Davis and Krzysztof Penderecki. Multiple projects can also be developed concurrently. The visual artist Gerhard Richter provides a striking example of this approach. He has worked in multiple unrelated areas over decades making, for example, his representational 'photo paintings' intermittently since 1962, and then various ongoing abstract projects, such as the 'colour chart' series that he began 1966. Richter has said that he began making abstract art after feeling cornered by critics who had labelled him a photo-realist.

The Anti-Absolute Freedom Argument presents a difficult problem and a host of questions. Is it permissible to exercise freedom that not everyone enjoys? Are there limits to this freedom? Are there idioms to avoid? If Viennese waltzes and surfer rock are OK, what about reggae, klezmer and West African drumming? Is West African drumming permissible if there is a political dimension to the work, even if it is not your story to tell? Is it OK to engage with West African drumming techniques without a political dimension? Are there subjects to avoid, such as the death of African American men at the hands of the police?¹² A single-voice composer may face similar concerns but the multi-voice composer is more likely to wade into these complicated waters. I take these concerns seriously, but I don't think they undermine the value of exploration across idiom. Exploration can still be good even if it should rightly be constrained by the concerns addressed above.

Emphasis on artistic voice is also an emphasis on sole-authored artistic works. New music has seen a move towards collaboration and co-authorship, but the cult of the author still looms large. I have the sense that many continue to regard co-composition as weird and lesser.¹³ While many of the twentieth century's radical isms and schools of composition rejected romanticism, the romantic conception of the lone composer went largely unchallenged, with the paradox that Cage's anti-humanistic chance music registered within the cult of John Cage. There is nothing wrong with sole-authored composition. But I think co-authorship is equally valid and that the culture of our scene, cast under the long shadow of romanticism, has been slow to see what it offers.

Some composers leave a strong sense of personal identity in their works. People make statements like 'only Rebecca Saunders could have composed that piece', or 'even though Igor Stravinsky composed in many styles and idioms, the work always displays a strong sense of his fingerprints'.¹⁴ This sort of voiceness is not a problem per se; the problem lies in the idealisation of voiceness, a powerful force that is baked deep into the new music value system. In hypothetical example 1, presented earlier, Geoff rejected changing the proportions of his piece because he concluded that weird structural proportions did not fit with his practice or their sense of self. I think they were placing

¹² For example, Georg Friedrich Haas' solo trumpet work, *I can't breathe* (2015), was written in response to the killing of Eric Garner by the New York police. See George Lewis's essay on the subject, 'I can't breathe: a virtual dialogue' at <https://newmusicusa.org/nmbx/i-cant-breathe-a-virtual-dialogue/#> (accessed 11 September 2023).

¹³ For example, in R.F. Kuang's recent novel *Yellowface*, the protagonist is an author who is about to send a novel out to literary agents even though the novel was largely written by a dead friend. The protagonist is faced with a dilemma: should she credit her dead friend as a co-author? She justifies her decision to cut her dead friend out with the following logic: 'I gave it a chance to go out into the world without the judgement that multiple authorship always entails'. (Kuang, R.F., *Yellowface* (New York: William Morrow, 2023), p. 37).

¹⁴ For more on Stravinsky's 'fingerprints', and the way recent scholarship on Stravinsky's work emphasise unities across his output, see Taylor-Jay, pp. 105–10.

too much emphasis on voiceness, using it as something to hide behind, and that in this case voiceness acts an excuse for self-limitation and risk-adverse composition.

Another problem with voiceness is in finding an answer to the question, how should a composer who is lacking a voice go about getting one? One answer is that there is nothing a composer can do: you have it, or you don't. This position is unhelpful. A seemingly more useful way of thinking about how to acquire a voice is to believe that all composers have an inherent voice and need only resist the forces denying them access to it. In Geoff's case, I used the word 'excited' to characterise his feelings about the longer and weirdly proportioned version of his piece. If you believe in inherent voices, perhaps this excitement was Geoff's true voice speaking. Perhaps his overly self-conscious and codified sense of his own artistic voice ironically inhibited him from his true voice. I like this train of thought as it leads Geoff to a view that he is more excited about, but I don't think the discourse of voiceness is necessary or useful here. We can learn the psychological lesson that sometimes we have good ideas we are reluctant to accept because they take us out of our comfort zone without having to formulate it in terms of voice. Another answer to the question of how to find a voice is that it is the product of hard work, but I do not believe that hard work is a necessary condition for making good pieces. Some bad pieces resulted from enormous work, some great pieces from little work. Nonetheless, even if hard work is useful for finding your voice, it is not clear what that work involves and how it is different to the work we all do in trying to make better pieces.

I would like to finish by suggesting that an obsession with voice may also have negative emotional consequences for some composers, such as those who feel that they don't have an artistic voice yet want one because they have internalised the idealisation of voice prevalent in new music. I have been in this position and the burden to find an artistic voice made me sad and stressed, not least because it was not clear how to get one. The composer who perceives themselves to have a voice is not faced with the same sadness and stress, and indeed their self-aware identification with a given artistic project may be a source of comfort. Nonetheless, overly identifying with a given artistic project may also be stopping them from enjoying composing maximally. Geoff and Deirdre rejected propositions that excited them because they did not conform with what they had decided was 'their practice', a rejection that stopped them writing more interesting and worthwhile pieces and enjoying the pleasure of compositional risk-taking and adventure.

One reason I wanted to write this article was to think through why I am annoyed when artists today use the phrase 'my practice' in speaking about their work. I see it signals that they are serious about their work, that they are grown-ups, that they have thought about all the options available to them and that they have decided on an artistic direction. That's all fine, and it's useful to have an answer ready to go at barbeques when asked, 'what kind of music do you write?' Nonetheless it feels defensive to me, something to hide behind. In thinking through my annoyance at the expression 'my practice', I have considered the positives and negatives of single-voiced or more capricious approaches to composing to show the limitations of the former and the largely untapped potential of the latter. My aim is not to discredit the model of sole-authored compositions by composers who have a distinctive and consistent practice that they

can label and define; people who use the phrase 'my practice' often make great work. Rather, my objective is to try and loosen the hegemonic grip of the single-voiced model on the value system of new music.

This article is based on a talk I wrote for the lecture series that was part of the 2023 Darmstadt Summer Courses. My thanks go to Uri Agnon and Vid Simoniti for their comments on an earlier draft, and to Christopher Fox for his editorial assistance.