

PROFILE: MATTHEW SHLOMOWITZ

Matthew Shlomowitz is a London-based composer, raised in Adelaide, Australia. He is co-director of Plus-Minus Ensemble and runs the Soundmaking podcast with Håkon Stene. He teaches at the University of Southampton and was on the composition faculty for the 2023 Darmstadt Summer Courses. As winner of the 6th Johann Joseph Fux Competition for Opera Composition, his opera *Electric Dreams* was staged at the 2017 ORF Musikprotokoll (directed by Philipp M. Krenn), with a second production in 2023 at the Grand Théâtre de Genève (directed by Sara Ostertag). Other recent pieces include *Glücklich, Glücklich, Freude, Freude*, written for keyboardist Mark Knoop and the SWR Symphonieorchester premiered at 2019 Donaueschinger Musiktage, *Minor Characters*, a one-hour show written with composer/singer Jennifer Walshe for Ensemble Nickel, and *6 Scenes for Turntables and Orchestra*, written with composer/turntablist Mariam Rezaei and commissioned by Frankfurt Radio Orchestra, Brussels Philharmonic and Norwegian Radio Orchestra.



Matthew Shlomowitz,
photo credit Ash Sealey

Your music has often used elements of what one might call ‘vernacular music’. How did you arrive at the point where you wanted to explore the relationship between this sort of material and a quite different sort of compositional technique?

When I moved to London in 2002 after studying with Brian Ferneyhough in the USA, I was thinking about music in a certain narrow way. I had two CD books (I’d binned the plastic covers for easier transportation): one for historical and contemporary classical music, the other for pop. I started going to dance and live art shows and loved seeing work that could be weird, funny, trashy, pop, difficult and profound. I wanted that mix of qualities. I also had my first child around this time and became friends with young parents who were into music and the arts, without knowing anything about our scene. They’d ask to hear my music. Sometimes they’d break through my defences, and it was embarrassing playing them my algorithmically constructed atonal and metre-less music. I wanted to write music more folks could relate to. The vibrancy, silliness and twisted tonality of Richard Ayres’ *NONcerto for orchestra, cello and high soprano* (2001) suggested a way out. In 2005 I composed *Free Square Jazz* for Belgian group Champ d’Action, which was as you describe: new-music systematic techniques applied to free jazz musical ideas. I approached composing like that for some years, usually treating the musical ideas as if they were samples, and then devising techniques for organising and manipulating them. I have moved on from that approach now. I love to mix up all the sounds and techniques these days.

In your Letter Pieces there is an explicit separation between compositional structure and sound; the performers choose the sounds and movements that they want to use, but the structure is always the same. How did you arrive at this way of making pieces?

In 2008, David Helbich, Mark Knoop and I performed in a canteen space, as the late-night entertainment at the Fifth Biennial Conference on Music Since 1900 at University of York. We called ourselves The Calculators because we performed *Counting Duets* by Tom Johnson. David's background is in composition, but at this time he was moving into movement work (he later moved into conceptual public art projects). In the first place then, I wrote *Letter Piece 1* for this show because David had the skills to perform the movement part. The programme also featured David performing his own solo works, which had made a big impression on me the year before. In *Schnipsen* he humorously and transfixingly plays off just two elements: one arm moving in a continuous circle at different speeds and the other arm clicking his fingers at different tempi. I'd also been massively inspired by seeing *Both Sitting Duet* by Jonathan Burrows and Matteo Fargion, which has similarly clear, reduced and game-like qualities.

I had also been exploring different approaches to 'open scores' and wasn't happy with the pieces I was making. I was coming to a view that open scores are most interesting when the score gives agency to performers to make important creative decisions, but the nature of the creative task is highly defined. For example, Anthony Braxton's *Ghost Trance Music* and James Saunders' *things to do* series of task-based pieces. I'd also situate my incorporation of movement in *Letter Pieces* within a 'performative turn' that arose in new music in the early twenty-first century among works by composers such as Simon Steen-Anderson, Natacha Diels and Jennifer Walsh.

You've created a series of works that mix the lecture and concert formats. There are precedents for this – Cage's 45' for a speaker or Kagel's Sur Scène, perhaps – but your lecture-recitals seem more 'academic', less surreal. Paradoxically this seems to me to make them more unsettling. Was this your intention?

Yes! The lecture format can be engaged in artistic contexts for different purposes and in different registers – informative, preposterous, parodic, sincere, etc. In my *Lecture About Bad Music* (2015), a 45-minute work where I perform the lecturer part alongside four musicians, I was going for a friendly academic vibe. I will come back to your excellent question about an 'unsettling intention', but first I want to cover some broader intentions.

I am depressed by the way classical music is often discussed in mainstream contexts. For instance, between pieces in television broadcasts of the Proms you'll hear experts telling inane and irrelevant composer biography stories, or making empty pronouncements like, 'the composer was really inspired when they wrote this one'. I appreciate how experts in other fields meaningfully communicate with general audiences. It can seem like there is some unsaid romantic understanding that classical music is so amazing and ineffable that no words can be of any value, so we are just passing the time as they set up the chairs for the orchestra. In *Bad Music*, I wanted to talk about music, specifically exploring the question: what is going on when we make aesthetic judgements? I hope the piece is informative. I'd been reading

scholarship which I wanted to share as I found it super provocative and interesting. More specially, some of the studies I read included psychological experiments that I thought would be fun to stage and test on an audience. I should also mention that I had recently seen two wonderful dance-lecture pieces, Xavier Le Roy's *Product of Circumstances* (1999) and Jérôme Bel's *Véronique Doisneau* (2005), that excited me to go in the lecture direction.

While I may not agree with everything I propose in *Bad Music*, every idea (none of them are mine) is interesting and worthy of consideration. My intention is never to be absurd; every claim can reasonably and productively be taken at face value. I think the main reason it can be 'unsettling' – although perhaps 'annoying' is more accurate – comes from the claims I make about audience experience. For instance, after a short musical piece is played, I make pronouncements like, 'you will have found the second part of that piece boring'. Audiences may be annoyed by not knowing whether such positivistic claims are meant sincerely, disagreeing with the description of their experience, and most of us don't like being reduced to a typical listener. Shortly before I began work on this piece, I completed a teacher training programme at my work. I learnt about how humour, play and a personal touch improved student concentration and information retention in classes. This gave me ideas for how artistic forms and strategies could be interestingly and usefully applied to academic topics, and how causing annoyance could also be productive for maintaining focus.

Your opera Electric Dreams seems to me an unmistakably Shlomowitzian work: it's funny, eclectic, energetic. Surely these qualities constitute a 'voice'?

In my paper, I pose the question, 'do we still need an "artistic voice"?. I do not argue that having a voice is impossible or a bad thing. Rather, I suggest that there might be some pitfalls to voiceness that we should take seriously. For example, I think the emphasis on voiceness has made new music slow to embrace other models of music-making, such as composing in teams. I suggest that overly identifying with a particular sense of self could lead to risk-averse composing. And that for the composer who wants a voice, my feeling is that self-consciously constructing one's voice is unlikely to be the best way of achieving that.