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“Artists, Choices, and Chance”

Last week Carol Lieberman and Mark Kroll conducted a concert that was not only entertaining, but truly eye opening. Lieberman and Kroll performed five pieces in a manner that many of the audience present have never experienced. Kroll or Lieberman, sometimes both, would first perform the piece the way that the original composer would have wanted it to be played. Then they would play the same piece, but this time with different instruments. This allowed the audience to hear what the composer wished for when he originally wrote the piece and then hear how the same piece can sound completely different using different instruments. The concert was a great example of how older music can still be played today, but with a modern sound to it. One of the most popular themes of music today is rap. Although classical music and rap seem like very different genres of music, many popular rappers today, such as Lil’ Wayne, have implemented instruments such as violins and pianos into their songs. In some songs, rappers may use actual classic compositions for their chorus. This gives the song a true mix of “next generation” hip hop and the softer sound of classical music. However, the question becomes whether or not the original composer would have wanted their pieces being used and played differently. If the composers of the past had the use of certain instruments today, such as amplifiers and auto tone, would they have used them, or kept their music the way it is? Lieberman and Kroll used pieces from Bach, Couperin, and Scarlatti, all of whom died during a time, in which there was only the use of a small variety of instruments. Yet these composers would have appreciated that their music is still being played today even if it is in different ways.

In the past, composers of all different genres were looking for a way to stand out from the rest. This was easier said than done because of the small arsenal of instruments. This being said, composers would have welcomed the new instruments that we have today. This would have made it easier for them to gain originality and popularity. In class we talked about what it means to be original and how hard it was gain authenticity. This was shown during the concert in Brooks Theater. Lieberman and Kroll showed no originality when they played Domenico Scarlatti’s piece the way he would have wanted it to be performed, but when they used modern instruments Kroll and Lieberman seemed to make their own. Although they did not write the piece it still seemed to have a sense of authenticity, which was only achieved through the use of these new instruments. Carol Lieberman has performed pieces from great performers such as Beethoven, Mozart, and Brahms, and she manages to give them all a new modern twist to them. It would be unfair to say that all composers of the past would have needed to use modern day instruments. Composers, like Beethoven, made tremendous use of what was offered to them, by still gaining authenticity. Beethoven managed to gain popularity through his expert piano playing ability, despite struggling with his hearing loss. Like Beethoven, Mozart also had a unique aspect to his music, which were his great symphonies. Both composers contained a distinctive feature to their music from working with what they had. Although Beethoven and Mozart both contained great creativity and originality, they would not have objected the use of modern day instruments. These instruments would have only allowed them to stretch their variety of music farther.

Composers of the past and present have all dealt with the feeling of either joy or irritation when hearing their music being played by the orchestra. There have been countless cases of composers being pleased by the way the way the music is played, and there also have been numerous accounts of let down. It takes composers a large amount of time and effort to create a work that they believe will sound magnificent. Therefore it is only fair that the composer should have the choice of what kinds of instruments are used and how they are played. The composer and the orchestra must be on the same page if the music is going to be successful. But overtime the instruments that composers would have wanted to be used might become outdated and deemed unpopular among younger audiences. Rather than have their works become obsolete and forgotten, composers would probably give in to their music being tweaked in order to stay fresh. The original composer might be gone, but their music still lives on. The composer is probably happy to leave some sort of legacy behind, and knowing that their music is able to fit numerous genres is a success within itself. It is hard to know exactly how the composers of the past would feel about this subject matter, but from Mozart and Beethoven’s history we can see that they would not have minded this type of musical evolution. Mozart began his career during a time where simpler music was played. Mozart, however, led a movement to write and perform more complex music by adding a string quartet and a string quintet. Mozart changed the style of music during his era, showing his progressive personality, and showing that the thought of his music being played in a way more fitting of a new age would have pleased him.

Although composers try their best to have their music played exactly how they want it to be played, sometimes it is simply not possibly. It is simply not possible to have an orchestra play the exact tones as you want, because there might be six instruments playing at one time and it is tough to have everyone on the same tone. Because of this composers must write their music with the understanding that it would not be perfect. Basically the composer is giving their musicians some leeway and room for error. After all human error takes part in everything from math to sports. It is no different in music. Although symphonies written from Beethoven and Mozart might seem near perfect, they were written in a way that the audience would not notice is a mistake were made during the performance. This is what can make a piece great or average, a good composer does not have to take a chance at all because they have accepted the fact their piece is not going to be played the exact way they want and therefore write it anticipating mistakes. Even in today’s most popular music, bands and other musicians execute their music so that it can be performed with a few mistakes and still be deemed good and original. For example when a present day band, such as Dave Matthews performs in front of large crowds, their lyrics and instrument playing is not left up to chance. Rather conducted in a manner that allows for randomness to occur. They may lengthen the beat of the song, allowing members of the band to perform guitar solos or drum solos. Lengthening the beat is just one of many ways composers anticipate error. The same conduct today occurred in the time of Bach and Couperin as well. During the concert at the Brooks Music Hall, Lieberman and Kroll are good examples of how composers account for error. They too expected to be affected by randomness. The factors included the lighting in the room and the loudness of the room. In one particular piece, Mark Kroll asked the crowd to be as quiet as possible, in order to hear the piece he was playing. The piece that was played contained a very quiet tone and therefore Kroll had anticipated that if the hall was loud that it would be nearly impossible to hear. Lighting in the concert hall played a factor as well, most of the lights were pointed on center stage, so that Kroll and Lieberman were able to see what they were playing. Like almost all composers and musicians Kroll intentionally instructed his audience to quiet down and the lighting to be centered on the stage in order to account for randomness.

Composers would have appreciated that their music is still being played today, even if it is with modern day instruments. Many composers would have liked to know that they have left on a legacy. In the past composers did not have the wide variety of instruments that we have today and yet still managed to create a piece that was not only appealing to the audience, but original in their respective age. Because originality was so hard to achieve with such a small arsenal of instruments, it could be assumed that many composers would have liked to have their music played with instruments that we have today. Some composers might have stuck to their instruments, but as said before would have approved of the remaking of their music in order to keep it popular hundreds of years later. Whatever period of time it is the composer who should have the right to oversee the use of the instrument. It is necessary if the piece is to be successful, but when the composer is long since passed, the use of the instrument is more up to the musician as we could see during the concert last week. Even though he composer did not have the opportunity to chose which instrument is being used, their music is still being played today. Almost all composers account for randomness when writing their pieces and sometimes action must be taken in order to see the success of their work. Once again, we could see from Kroll and Lieberman that could simply mean telling the audience to quiet down. It is interesting to wonder how music in the future will be performed. We have already made great strides in creating new and improved instruments since composers like Bach and Mozart, but what will come in another three hundred years? What kind of music will make an impact on society the way Bach and Mozart did? Will it still be classical music or will it be the ever increasing popularity of rap?