

SONIC: A 21ST CENTURY SNAPSHOT

BY WILLIAM ROBIN

“We’re only in 2015, and I think it’s a little close, and hard to get a really big, umbrella picture of what’s going on, in the moment,” composer Nina C. Young said recently, when asked just what the sounds of the new century might entail. “Anything anyone has to say is just conjecture,” she added. “This is my point of view, from my small little corner of the new-music world.”

Attempts to encapsulate the massive and multifarious domain of contemporary composition in the 21st century will be, indeed, pure conjecture. Fortunately, the ambitions of American Composers Orchestra’s SONiC festival are more astutely limited. “What we always said about this festival was it was a snapshot of a generation, rather than a movie,” SONiC curator, composer and ACO’s Artistic Director Derek Bermel told me. “We can’t possibly capture everything that’s going on.” Instead, the festival’s goal is to “provide some kind of insight into all the different directions that composers in a new generation are going: all the influences, all the different traditions and styles.”

So what might those traditions, influences, and styles be? And how might the festival preview the broad purview of new music today? Over the summer, I spoke with and emailed a half-dozen SONiC participants. Nearly all shied away from summarizing or categorizing the nascent century. In that spirit, this essay will briefly explore several themes or trends—aspects that unite today’s 40-or-under composers—instead of attempting to compartmentalize such a variegated scene.

Indeed, that refusal to pigeonhole is itself indicative of a core value among younger composers: an **openness** towards a variety of styles and techniques, and an understanding that the ecosystem they inhabit is marked by diversity. “We don’t live in an era where there’s a standard way of going about things, which is great,” composer Hannah Lash said. If one could neatly chop up the new music of the last century into textbook chapters of competing trends—neo-classicism, serialism, indeterminism, experimentalism, minimalism, spectralism—not only are there an explosion of overlapping styles in the 21st century, but there aren’t even clear labels for most of them.

And perhaps that’s as it should be. As Lash observed, “Once you start generalizing, actually the noise in your head becomes greater than the noise of the music, and you stop listening, you just start categorizing.” Shirking categorization allows listeners to examine and appreciate music at the level of the individual work, entering the concert hall without preconceptions. Openness is also, to an extent, the result of historical circumstance. “My generation of composers are lucky enough to have grown up with an open attitude from our professors and mentors so far as style and direction are concerned,” Melody Eötvös said. “This allowed us to venture along whichever trajectory peaked our interests.”

That openness might also be facilitated by **technology**. Certainly that’s nothing new: the viol, printing press, pianoforte, and electronic music studio are all technologies that drastically

recast classical music in their respective eras. But an unprecedented access to music across the globe facilitates an understanding that composers exist in a broader world, one that can’t simply be carved into groupings like Uptown and Downtown. The web can act as a crucial ego-killer; it’s easier to assume that your music isn’t the center of the universe when you can find other pockets of that universe in a quick Google search. As a result of the Internet, conductor and founder of new-music collective wild Up Christopher Rountree said, “Everybody’s producing so much—people are being discovered in a different way. I feel if people are making things that are meaningful, they’ll be meaningful to a small community and be found by a larger community.”

And then there is the integration of technology into musical practice. Angélica Negrón merges new and old technologies in her ACO-commissioned SONiC work, which introduces robots—a group of eight self-playing percussion instruments—into the symphonic realm. “*Me he perdido* explores the notion of expanding what a traditional orchestra looks and sounds like with the integration of unconventional sound interfaces and the incorporation of robotics into orchestral performance,” she told me. “It’s not only about the ongoing interest in new sounds but mostly about creating an immersive experience for the listener and finding new ways of approaching a musical performance.” Another example is a concert aptly entitled “Machine Music” that features invented instruments along with voices and viols. In that program, composer Molly Herron collaborates with instrument maker Andy Cavatorta in a new composition for *Dervishes Robot*—a computer-controlled instrument of whirling tubes that has been described as sounding like “a choir of angry angels.” Also on display are sound orbs, a tactile digital musical interface created by composer/inventor Albert Behar, and the iLophone a pitch-bending new iPhone instrument conceived by Levy Lorenzo.

Creating **immersive experiences** is another essential factor today. Young spoke of “a new awareness and focus on personal, critical self-listening” and “a new sensitivity to timing, and form, and perhaps what the overall listening experience would be.” That awareness is shaped by technology—instant playback from your MacBook provides instant feedback for your composition—but also by an awareness that the concert and album should be all-encompassing experiences. The *Gesamtkunstwerk* is not exactly novel, but there is an increased attention to crafting every single aspect of an audience’s engagement with contemporary music. Young described “a movement to try to integrate and make the whole concert experience more welcoming, more friendly, more interactive, more participatory from both sides of the stage.” Venues including Chicago’s Constellation and New York’s Le Poisson Rouge, Roulette, and National Sawdust place new music in a specially crafted context. Labels such as New Amsterdam Records—directed by SONiC participants Judd Greenstein and William Brittelle, as well as Sarah Kirkland Snider—think through every facet of an album, creating immaculate sonic spaces. Ensembles like Alarm Will Sound, JACK Quartet, and wild Up are as theatrically minded as they are musically engaged.

And though musicians often cite the influence of pop on these carefully realized albums and concerts, one might also view them as post-Cageian attempts to fully account for all the sounds that a listener might encounter. Rountree spoke of his fascination with “things that make me listen harder”; restructuring the live experience can help hone the ears. Despite

its engagement with multimedia elements, Rountree didn't think of wild Up as a theatre ensemble: "We definitely are a chamber orchestra, but we want this thing to feel like, when you enter the space of a concert, it's about ideas."

That immersion will be tangible at SONiC's AfterHours programs, which thoughtfully stage encounters with visual artists, choreographers, and jazz. AfterHours curator and composer Anna Clyne said that "these eclectic shows explore a wide variety of ways that composers are interacting with other media and art forms." Those interdisciplinary projects also point out a key aspect of new music: **integration and hybridity**. As Clyne explained, "This new generation of composers are pushing boundaries by developing collaborations with artists from other art forms, and through expanding the instrumental palette through the invention and integration of new instruments." Composers engage with other art forms as well as popular music, world music, jazz, and many strains of new music—from blissful minimalism to forbidding modernism—in what Negrón described as "a kind of insatiable quest for new sounds."

Since 1977, American Composers Orchestra has facilitated that insatiable quest by championing emerging composers. With programs such as Underwood New Music Readings and the national network EarShot, nearly every compositional style flows through ACO at one point or another. "We see a whole bunch of scores, and in my role there I try to look at everything," Bermel said. Recent projects such as coLABoratory—which encourages experimentation through developing works in extended incubation periods—and the Jazz Composers Orchestra Institute—which allows jazz composers to write for the symphony—explore the orchestra in all its possible manifestations. SONiC represents a natural extension of these activities. Bermel described the importance of bringing outside voices to the orchestra: the hybridity of today is as much about drawing new musicians into the fold as it is about letting established composers investigate unfamiliar terrain.

Bermel noted that, "There's just a lot more curiosity across these borders...there's a lot of energy towards trying to embrace music in all its forms." At SONiC, wild Up plays arrangements of the Misfits alongside a piano concerto by Andrew McIntosh; the JACK Quartet performs Caroline Shaw's quirky rearrangements of old folk songs; Roomful of Teeth incorporates vocal techniques from around the globe. And integration implies not only the fusion of pop and classical, but also the melding of multiple impulses of the avant-garde. Composer Alex Minck said that his SONiC piece *Continuo*, commissioned and premiered by ACO, "mingles a lot of polemical musical materials in novel ways (from both a dialectical perspective and a perspective of hybridization), without simply sounding stylistically 'eclectic.'"

The implicit premise of the festival—what Bermel described as a loosely unifying theme—is that of **collaboration**. From AfterHours interdisciplinary mingling to Judd Greenstein's work with singer-songwriter DM Stith to JACK's long-term partnerships with other ensembles and nearly every composer alive, collaboration is in the center of SONiC. This can mean music that explicitly ignores genre boundaries or it can mean bringing together performers and composers (and composer-performers) into ongoing, iterative conversation. Ensembles are the driving engines of contemporary music, shaping how work is created and received.

Collaboration is tied to a particular **entrepreneurial or DIY spirit**. "I think the role of the composer is not just sitting somewhere in a tower and writing some music, but it's being an active musician, artist, and participant," Young said. Do-it-yourself has a long legacy in classical music; for every composer that rustled up a commission, three others started their own madrigal choir, Schubertiade, or PhD program. But that self-drive seems nearly omnipresent today, whether in composer-collectives, ensembles, record labels, or musicians self-publishing and self-promoting online—perhaps as much a result of recession-era economic scarcity as of youthful savvy.

Although the occasionally bloody Facebook comment thread might suggest otherwise, the new-music world seems particularly friendly these days: there is a pervasive sense of **community**. And **scene** has become a word that increasingly crops up. Something resembling a scene emerged in New York in the past decade around a stable cluster of performers, composers, and institutions. Similar scenes exist in Chicago and also Los Angeles, which has become the latest focal point. Scenes are, of course, about perception: artistic activity is never limited to major metropolitan areas, and those cities have had a robust new-music presence for decades. But the concept of "scene" points to the fact that musicians are thinking locally rather than nationally (when was the last time you heard a composer talk about creating an "American sound"?) The possessive pronoun of Greenstein's *My City* for ACO suggests a personal, musical investment in the specifics of New York. And Eötvös, an Australian transplant, navigates her own sense of the local in her ACO commission for SONiC *Red Dirt | Silver Rain*. "All I can say is RDSR represents myself," she told me. "This piece is first and foremost me connecting and reaching out to my homeland and childhood, 'cause no matter how much I try to bring it closer both of those things are always going to feel so far away. Writing this piece is a way for me to acknowledge my past and nod my head to the beautiful expanse that is Australia and wave a grateful hand at my past memories and a childhood full of music and barefoot outdoor adventures in the dirt and rain."

That eloquent turn inwards, a reflection on the relationship between place and past, speaks to the priorities of 21st century musicians, and also the broader implications of SONiC's snapshot curation. As Bermel said, "It's about raising awareness and putting up some signposts, and saying: 'Join us for this journey.'"

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