Electronic Conference Proceedings

Proud Voices: Queer Sounds in the Concert Hall and Beyond

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ABSTRACT

Since its inception Contact Contemporary Music has presented a concert celebrating queer artists and queer issues as part of its annual concert series. In contrast to many other arts practices such as theatre, dance and literature, there has been little, if any, representation of queer issues in contemporary concert music. Contact Contemporary Music is the only new music organization that has consistently devoted a portion of its concert series to queer issues, and has partnered with Toronto Pride for the past seven years to present our concerts as Official Pride Events facing many challenges including apprehension within the music community and community at large, and misunderstanding within the queer community.

Although there has been a wealth of research devoted to sexual diversity in music, little research has been done about current practices of queer composers and performers. Focusing on music from the second world war to present, of particular interest are the lives of influential composers John Cage, who was not out, and Lou Harrison, who was not only openly gay but also quite politically active in the gay community. These two composers were (and still are) highly influential. They were friends and were often collaborators, but integrated their sexuality and personal lives into their art in markedly different ways. In fact, Harrison is widely credited with composing the first opera with an openly gay main character, /Young Caesar/. John Cage, on the other hand, had famously never “come out”. Over the forty years of the gay liberation movement, what, if anything, has changed? Have composers and musicians had a direct effect on the gay movement? Has the gay movement had an effect on gay composers and musicians? What does this mean to the music community, the gay community and the community at large? What are the challenges faced by artists and presenters? What are the opportunities?
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To be queer is to be a sublime outcast free to cross borders, to exist in the wilderness, to revel in the margins. As outsiders, we surpass limitations, defy boundaries, destabilize identities; we refuse containment and shun the constraints of narrow definitions. Existing in the space between established alternatives, we stand at the crossroads of male and female, effable and ineffable, timeless and avant-garde, possible and impossible. Leaving the constrictions of what is known, we step towards the exquisitely undiscovered.

Brendan Healy, Artistic Director,
Buddies In Bad Times Theatre, Toronto

Contact Contemporary Music is a Toronto based concert producing organization with a resident chamber ensemble focused on music based multi-media productions in collaboration with some of the most innovative composers of our time. Since its inception in 2003 Contact Contemporary Music has presented a concert celebrating queer artists and queer issues as part of its annual concert series. In contrast to many other arts practices such as theatre, dance and literature, there has been little, if any, representation of queer issues in contemporary concert music. Contact Contemporary Music is the only new music organization that has consistently devoted a portion of its concert series to queer issues, and has partnered with Toronto Pride for the past seven years to present concerts as official Pride events facing apprehension within the music community and community at large, and misunderstanding within the queer community itself.

Although there has been a wealth of research devoted to sexual diversity in music, little research has been done about current practices of queer composers and performers. Of particular interest are the lives and influence of influential composers John Cage, who was not out, and Lou Harrison, who was out and active in the queer community. Friends and frequent collaborators, they integrated their sexuality and personal lives into their art in markedly different ways. In fact, Harrison is widely credited with composing the first opera with a queer main character entitled *Young Caesar*. John Cage, on the other hand, had famously never "come out". In more than forty years of queer liberation what, if anything, has changed? Have composers and musicians had a direct effect on the queer movement? Has the queer movement had an effect on composers and musicians? What does this mean to the music community, the queer community and the community at large? What are the challenges faced by artists and those who present them? What are the opportunities?

The following is a look at the brief and continuing history of Contact’s annual Pride presentations and discussions with practicing composers about their sexuality and how it may or may not affect their music making.

By making musical situations which are analogous to desirable social circumstances which we do not yet have, we make music suggestive and relevant to the serious questions which face Mankind.

Contact Contemporary Music was born out of an association of artists working at a community music school. Presenting concerts that reflect and respond to the community lies at the ethos of the organization. In June 2003 Contact Contemporary Music set upon a path that would prove to set it apart
from any other contemporary music organization by celebrating the music of queer artists, distinguishing it, and to some extent defining the new organization in a crowded milieu. The challenge was how to present this work in a context that would be relevant to artists and audiences alike. Adopting the mindset that challenges equal opportunities, the idea of presenting a concert in connection with Toronto’s annual Pride festival was explored. The first challenge was to find repertoire that would culminate in a coherent and relevant program, followed by the challenge to convince anyone outside the organization that this was in fact a good idea. In other words, how are we going to fund this endeavour? Public funders such as the Toronto Arts Council were reluctant to fund an upstart organization who sought to tread where no other music organizations had in the past. Funders representing the LGBTQ community were unfamiliar with the art form of contemporary concert music.

We ran the risk of becoming known as the “gay” new music group. In a way, we were forced to establish our identity quite quickly. However, that identity was challenged depending on with whom we were communicating. For instance, when identifying the organization to the music community, we were (and continue to be) challenged with the task of describing ourselves in any one of the following manners: LGBTQ, LGBTQQ, LGBTQQ2Q, LGBTQQQQ5S, LGBTQTIIQQ2SA (Lesbian, Queer, Bisexual, Transsexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer/Questioning, Two Spiritued, Allies). When identifying to the queer community, we are equally challenged with the task of describing ourselves again, but in a different way: new music, contemporary music, contemporary concert music, new classical, post-classical, modern, post-modern, post-minimalist, etc. Eventually, with perseverance, Contact presented its first Pride concert entitled Amour.

A major catalyst in the development of our first Pride presentation happened almost a year previous to the concert when I discovered, quite by accident that one of Canada’s preeminent electroacoustic composers was in fact queer. This information did not come by means of any musical network, but while watching a Home & Garden television show profiling dog breeders in Vancouver. Once armed with this information, how do I approach him and ask if we can “out” him in concert? Finding repertoire that represented the diversity of the queer community proved to be an almost insurmountable challenge. To remedy this issue, we commissioned a new work from one of Canada’s most respected female composers. However, our efforts were somewhat derailed when said composer disclosed in a national newspaper preview of the concert that she did not feel particularly marginalized as part of the community (meaning the queer community, with whom she did not identify herself), however felt marginalized as the only female composer represented on the program.

This challenge held over to our next presentation, as composer Barry Truax points to what seems to be an almost complete absence of queer composers in the electro-acoustic community. Indeed, finding a female electro-acoustic composer who identified as queer proved to be even more of a challenge for our second Pride presentation entitled Electro Erotic: Electro-acoustic, Homo-erotic (2004). Finding suitable music for presentations by composers who identified as queer was akin to seeking out a queer bar pre-Stonewall. One had to talk to the “right people” and use codified language in order to avoid misunderstanding and alienation. Eventually, as the organization’s reputation grew it was able to introduce itself through trusted connections, but had to be mindful that some artists were willing to be out, while others preferred to remain private about their sexuality.

Contact’s Pride presentations strive to address issues that are relevant to the LGBTQ community while celebrating its artists: Transformed (2005) addressed transgender issues and featured works by Amnon Wolman, Rodney Sharman and Deirdre Piper; Drumdrag (2007) featured composer/drag artist
Gareth Farr as Lileth Lacroix; and Girl On Girl (2008) featured clarinetist Lori Freedman in a solo showcase concert performing works by female composers.

On July 20, 2005, Canada became the fourth country in the world and the first country in the Americas to legalize same-sex marriage nationwide with the enactment of the Civil Marriage Act. On November 30, 2005 after then Prime Minister Paul Martin announced Canadians would go to the polls on Jan. 23, 2006, Conservative Party Leader Stephen Harper reopened the hot-button issue of same-sex unions, saying he would hold a free vote on changing the definition of marriage if he were to become prime minister. In June 2006, our response was to program a concert that celebrated same-sex relationships and challenged the heteronormative views of marriage, while the debate of same-sex marriage re-entered the arena of Canadian politics. Our 2006 Pride presentation marked our fourth year of presenting Pride concerts and was the year we finally received funding from The Lesbian Gay Community Alliance Foundation, a community foundation whose funding priorities include social and cultural activities in the LGBTQ community. This funding was seen by many members of the arts community as a significant step towards the acceptance of contemporary music practices by the LGBTQ community.

In more than forty years of queer liberation what, if anything, has changed? Have composers and musicians had a direct effect on the queer movement? Has the queer movement had an effect on composers and musicians? What does this mean to the music community, the queer community and the community at large? What are the challenges faced by artists and music presenters? What are the opportunities?

I posed some questions to various artists with whom Contact Contemporary Music has worked in the past:

*Does your sexuality play a role in your music making? If so, how? If not, why?*

I can’t say it plays a conscious role in my music making. I certainly feel more sensitive to emotions and other aspects of life and I feel I can express those quite well; but I’m sure straight composers feel the same way. If I am writing a piece that has an obvious queer slant to it, obviously I would feel that I could do a better job of expressing that element than others. I don’t feel I should or have to express only “queer themes” (whatever they may be) in my music. Being queer is just part of my makeup, all of which goes into the type of music I create.

I think my personhood is embedded in my music, and certainly my sexuality is one part of my personhood, so it gets incorporated as well, sometimes explicitly, sometimes not.

The answer to the first part is easy: of course! Along with gender, cultural upbringing, education and everything else that has influenced who you are. The second question is much more difficult, because most of us don’t see ourselves from the outside as it were. The obvious aspects of the answer are to be found in my works that explore specifically homoerotic themes, or those that have gender implications where the heteronormative conventions (i.e. love songs where the object of one’s affection is assumed to be of the opposite sex) are not assumed. The rest gets murky and is much debated. For those that answer the question in the negative, I think it’s interesting to enquire how music has come to be regarded as something absolute that is unrelated to gender (in a society where everything is heavily gendered). In other words, how can you learn to suppress that element of your life in terms of artistic expression?
Androgyne, Mon Amour incorporates a setting of six poems by Tennessee Williams from his book of the same title. The poems are intensely lyrical, intimate and erotic in a celebration of queer love that is acted out, both musically and dramatically, by the live performer interacting in a variety of conventional and unconventional ways with the instrument, which is personified as his lover. vi

I’m not aware that my music has ever had anything to do with my gender or sexuality; certainly, there’s never been any sort of overt attempt on my part to make music an expression of my sexuality or as a tool in a political crusade. I’m not saying that it doesn't so express, just that I'm not aware of it. It’s true that occasionally my music employs imagery and emotion from my religious life, but even this is hardly a dominant force. If others see religion or sexuality in my music, that’s fine; I myself just don't see it or intend it. Strangely, perhaps, I’m really not that interested. vii

I have practiced yoga some 15 years and have become aware that the creative and sexual chakra are the same. All art springs from this ambiguous, sexual source. I have written theatre pieces with queer characters and which address queer themes, including queer political themes. My cabaret songs sometimes express queer humour, I think, but more as a kind of ethnicity than as an aspect of my politics. viii

It is evident that opinions are as varied and personal as the artists themselves. Further research has to be done in order to see if and how attitudes have changed and evolved. When posed with a similar question, John Cage offered the following:

... he mused further on the relationship of art and sexuality, particularly homosexuality. He acknowledged the growing contemporary interest in “queer composers,” such as Franz Schubert, a reassessment, he averred, “Which take the relationship between art and sex very seriously. I do not. Once I am doing something ‘serious,’ I don’t think about sex.” ix

Is it important to you to have a forum to contextualize your music making, or that a forum for this purpose exists.

I’m not sure that any particular aspect of identity is SO primary for me that grouping me with others who share that identity is really meaningful. All of us have multiple sometimes overlapping or even contradictory identities, and while sometimes being grouped according to one particular subgroup is interesting, I am a little wary of taking it too far. For example, there are some straight male composers with whom I feel a strongly shared aesthetic, and there are lesbian composers with whom I have very little in common, and vice versa of course. x

If you mean is it important to have concerts of all queer composers, yes I think that would be great. We would all have that one aspect of our lives in common and it would be interesting to see how our music comes out. It would also be great to compare notes (so to speak) to see if our sexuality did have some important role to play in what we produced. xi

Yes, absolutely, and that’s why I support any context that provides that opportunity. On the other hand, it’s also important not to ghettoize gender-based music, but to integrate it into larger contexts (where I’ve found it’s readily accepted anyway, especially by the younger generation for whom these issues are less severe). xii

I am not convinced that there is artistic/musical merit in presenting contemporary music with the fundamental direction as being related to queer/queer/homosexual life. Personally I am not only not interested in programs that focus on sexuality any more than I am programs that focus on music composed by those with blue eyes or who have a twin. It seems totally arbitrary and unrelated to musical properties. xiii
Contact’s practice of Pride presentations celebrate the lives and works of LGBTQ composers and musicians, not with the intention of ghettoizing, but to simply connect artists to our community and celebrate their contribution to the art form. If artists are reluctant to identify as part of the LGBTQ community, how do we claim an identity that is uniquely queer?

... obituaries are places where queers are buried in unmarked graves and where their lovers can expect to be Disappeared. xiv

The New York Times obituary for John Cage cites Cage and Merce Cunningham as “lifelong collaborators. Mr. Cage’s marriage to Xenia Andreyevna Kashevaroff ended in divorce in 1945. From 1970 until his death, he lived with Mr. Cunningham. There are no immediate survivors.” xv In fact, it is widely known that Cage and Cunningham cohabitated as early as the 1940’s. xvi In contrast, the New York Times obituary for Lou Harrison reads “his companion and only survivor, Todd Burlingam”… and sited “William Colvig, a craftsman who died in 2000 after 33 years as Harrison's companion.” xvii

John Cage never officially came out of the closet, whereas Lou Harrison was not only out but active in the queer community. It has been argued that Cage challenged social norms through his music, as exemplified in 4’33” and that his “silence” was his form of protest. xviii Harrison, on the other hand wrote an opera with a queer lead character. Would you say that either of these approaches reflects your own approach, or does it matter at all?

I don’t make a point of declaring my sexuality when I have a work performed. I do however usually dress with a little more style for the occasion in order to stress that I am a bit different from the normal audience members (for being a composer and perhaps for being queer). If in a discussion of my work it comes out that I am queer, so be it. xix

I think we have to consider the times and cultures where these two seminal figures lived, and not judge whether the choice each of them made was right or wrong. I’m an admirer of both (and feel lucky to meet them both – very warm and generous personalities). They both had integrity, but their approach was their own, and so has been mine. xx

I’m definitely out of the closet and happy to participate in the queer community, but I do feel that the most powerful thing I can do is act as if the revolution has already taken place, rather than to explicitly take on the role of activist. xxi

We have the good fortune as Canadians to live in one of very few nations with queer rights. I have lived and worked as an openly queer man since the early 80s; I have lost or been denied work and experienced prejudice because of my sexuality, especially in the 80s and early 90s. Times have changed. My straight colleagues were genuinely proud of my marriage and that Canadian law allowed me to sponsor an immigration. While I do not feel a society should ever be complacent about human rights, it is much more difficult to take rights away from people than to grant them. I made a conscious choice after returning to Canada from the Netherlands in 1984 to live as Lou Harrison lived, to be out in the music world as well as my private life. This including my teaching - even though in 1990 I was asked to "keep a lid on the queer stuff" by one of my colleagues at my first university teaching job. My first lecture included a work by Claude Vivier. The first question was "How did Claude Vivier die?" and another student shouted out "Ya, Peter wouldn't tell us!". I thought about my colleague's warning, then what a university should be: a place for honest, open learning, and answered truthfully that Claude had been killed by a rent-boy, a serial killer he had invited into his home. xxii

Identity is an important factor in the way we present our art. Why is it important to know the sexual orientation of an artist? Because this knowledge informs us in ways that few other details can.
Knowing the circumstances under which a composer worked, thought, and lived can give us yet another window into their work. xxiii

It is one important way we identify with each other. It is a way for artist and audience to connect on a level apart from ethnicity, aesthetics, style or socio-political standing. This knowledge can empower us as artists and as a community and allows us to take our common basic place in society.... nothing exalted, nothing vilified. It is simply “how we are” in society.

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i Brendan Healy, Buddies In Bad Times Theatre 2010-11 Season Brochure, (Toronto, 2010)
ii John Cage, Empty Words, Writings ’73-’74 (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1979), 183.
iv Interview with composer Michael Parker. Hereafter cited as MP.
v Interview with composer Eve Beglarian. Hereafter cited as EB.
vi Interview with composer Barry Truax. Hereafter cited as BT.
vii Interview with composer Deirdre Piper. Hereafter cited as DP.
viii Interview with composer Rodney Sharman. Hereafter cited as RS.
x EB
xi MP
xii BT
xiii Interview with musician Lori Freedman.
xiv John Gill, Queer Noises: Male and Female Homosexuality in Twentieth Century Music, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 26
xvi Harry hay, Radically queer: queer liberation in the words of its founder, ed. Will Roscoe, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 319-23
xix MP
xx BT
xxi EB
xxii RS
xxiii Daniel Felsenfeld, Benjamin Britten and Samuel Barber: Their Lives and Their Music, (Pompton Plains, NJ: Amadeus Press, 2005), 77