

Long live Ostrava Days!

Introduction to Ostrava Days 2019 Report

Petr Kotik, November 2020

A composer's work is creating music. Concerns about an audience's reaction have nothing to do with it. Yet, it is the audience that ultimately determines the fate of every piece that a composer creates.

For more than a hundred years, the majority of concert audiences have been rejecting new music; this is an unprecedented situation. There have been controversies about new compositions in the past, but such a sustained negative reaction has never happened before. This does seem to be changing now, and for me, Ostrava Days Festival was a catalyst in revealing the logic behind this shift.

The changes in audience perception that I have observed suggest the arrival of a new period, one with increased audience size and support for the new in music, and especially for works that have been marginalized by the mainstream music world. A single successful event can be explained away, but a festival like Ostrava Days – 18 concerts during a 10-day period, including large-scale orchestra and opera performances – provides broader, general implications.

Programming the Ostrava Days Festival has always been about the music and the music alone. The idea of programming concerts in order to attract larger audiences has never been considered, from the initial discussions I had with Earle Brown, Alvin Lucier and Christian Wolff twenty years ago, to the complex process of putting together today the Ostrava Days Festival. This is why I found the evolution of the audiences at Ostrava Days such a surprise. The increased numbers and high support for the music at our concerts has been the single most astonishing part of Ostrava Days for me. The continuous stream of people coming again and again, night after night, listening to and appreciating what they hear, indicates a broader shift in the audience's perception.

Understanding what one listens to requires a degree of familiarity, above all with the sound one hears. Any sound that is strange or unfamiliar throws everything into confusion. Only repeated listening can uncover the sound's content, identity and essence. What has happened recently is the "sound" of new music has increasingly been accepted by wider audiences, especially by the younger generations. This "sound" has become familiar, acceptable, and enjoyable because it has been adopted by some of the popular music that these young people listen to (pop, rap, rock, etc.). Suddenly, the popular "sound" moved closer to the "sound" of music that began to be composed several decades ago, music that is programmed at the festival in Ostrava.

By "sound," I don't mean notes and noises. The word "sound" is used here in the same way that one describes a popular band's or artist's music. "Sound" doesn't just mean sounds themselves, but the entire approach to making music, including the way it is structured. To see young audiences at Ostrava Days listening to and appreciating new music, especially at large-scale orchestra concerts, reveals this logic. A young person who only listens to rap can enjoy and

understand an hour-long performance of La Monte Young's *Composition #7*, for example. For the young generation, listening to new, experimental music (identified by the mainstream as indigestible) – Xenakis, Feldman, Cage and other composers performed at Ostrava Days – can be as enjoyable as it was for our grandparents to listen to Wagner. One of the explanations one hears is that after 20 years, Ostrava Days has “educated” its audiences. This is nonsense. Twenty years ago, most of these young people were attending nursery school.

This situation, so apparent at Ostrava Days, suggests a way we listen to music in general. To penetrate a composition, to reach its musical essence, one has to accept, without reservation, its “sound.” Without such an attitude, what follows is confusion and rejection. The “sound” of new compositions has been what prevented wider audiences in the past from accepting the new in music. They found this “sound” irritating, and thus never reached the musical essence of what they were listening to – that which is “musical” in each composition and is the essence of every piece of music. And the musical essence is permanent, whether it is Bach or Cage. To paraphrase Gertrude Stein: *“Nothing changes from generation to generation, except the way of seeing things. And that creates the composition of that generation,”* I would say: nothing changes except the way we listen to the “sound;” that which is musical remains the same from generation to generation. Long live Ostrava Days.