

**Opening the Symphonic Model:
Changing Traditions in the Symphony Orchestra**

Kevin Shepherd

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Changes in history can have a profound effect on the ways in which life is perceived. The late eighteenth century brought significant changes to life in general and perceptions were altered in many ways. The philosophical,

political, and scientific changes that arose during that period changed the prevailing concept of musical works as well. In contrast to earlier times, in the age of enlightenment, works of music became an entity in their own right. They became enduring works, which could be repeated, published, and stand alone in performance. That concept still prevails in the present day according to Lydia Goehr in her article, "Being True to the Work." Goehr's states that,

The changes which took place at the end of the eighteenth century gave rise to a new view of music as an independent practice whose concerns were predominantly musical. This independent practice became a practice geared towards producing enduring products insofar as it was determined by the more general concepts of fine arts, and the autonomous work of art.¹

According to Goehr, these changes resulted in what she terms the "work-concept."

The idea of a *work of art* resulted in many changes in the musical realm, including,

The building of concert halls, which moved music from a background to a foreground object of appreciation; the

¹ Lydia Goehr, "Being True to the Work," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 47 1 (1989): 56, accessed December 6, 2011, <http://jstor.org/stable/431993>

*preparation of the first program notes; the new conception of rehearsals as necessary to an adequate performance; dedicated publishing companies; and new laws investing copyright in the composer and associated plagiarism policies.*²

She refers to this change of perspective as the Romantic conception of musical works because that is the era in which it emerged. Music has changed stylistically since then, but this concept of the musical work still regulates modern day music. In fact, diverse styles of music try to attain the status of what is considered “serious” by aspiring to fit in to this concept. In addition, the “works-concept” is also applied to music written before this concept emerged in history. Vivaldi and Bach, for example, were composing to keep up with their weekly commitments in the church or court, but today those compositions are viewed through the lens of the perspective that developed in the late eighteenth century.

Goehr brings to light the open nature of the “works-concept” which allows for the possibility of modification, or change.

Open concepts are treated so that they can undergo alteration in their definition without losing their identity as new examples come to appear as standard, as the practice within which they function changes. Unlike

² IBID

*definitions of closed concepts, those of open concepts
are expanded and modified, but not replaced.*³

In her attempt to include diverse musical forms and styles under the umbrella of the “works-concept” she alludes to the dichotomy that exists between “a wish to continue, or broaden a tradition”⁴, as opposed to “the ever present attempt to overthrow tradition, or to change, or modify a style.”⁵ This concept, which has been prevalent since the late eighteenth century, allows inclusion because it is open to changes.

Doctor Tim Lake wrote a concerto for five-string banjo and orchestra, which can be considered an example of the open model. An interview with Doctor Lake highlighted his motivations, goals, and influences, which inspired the composition of this work. This work opens the model in that it is written for a solo five-string banjo with orchestral accompaniment. This not only brings a non-traditional instrument into the symphony orchestra as a soloist, but also uses non-traditional techniques that aren’t necessarily idiomatic for the five-string banjo. This work represents the dichotomy referenced above, as it makes use of many of the traditional Romantic orchestration techniques in an attempt to continue tradition, but also attempts to overthrow tradition by the innovative use of banjo.

³ Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works*, (Oxford, NY; Oxford University Press, 2007), 93

⁴ Goehr, *Being True to the Work*, 61

⁵ *IBID*, 62

The present day symphony orchestra is currently in a state of decline in terms of numbers of patrons, funding, and perceived relevance to a good portion of society. There is probably a combination of many factors, which are contributing to this sad state of affairs. From trends in society, to economics, to technology, the modern way of life seems to be leading away from the traditional symphony orchestra. The open model of the “works-concept” however, can include innovative works such as this work by Tim Lake, and will hopefully help to keep the tradition of the symphony orchestra alive, and to enhance it’s cultural relevance.

In our modern society, the layman might feel excluded from the tradition of the symphony orchestra. The symphony currently has a stigma attached to it branding it only for people who have obtained higher education, or are in the higher economic classes. In order for the symphony to survive, it must change to fit the trends of the modern world. One way in which this change might occur is to employ non-traditional instruments in a solo role within the orchestra. Instruments such as the banjo are familiar to the layman in contexts other than the orchestral setting. That familiarity may serve to attract a greater number of patrons, who ordinarily would feel out of place. That open model of change and expansion may help to keep the orchestral traditions alive.

The banjo, although an instrument typically used only in bluegrass music, and other country music genres, finds a new place in orchestral writing with Doctor Tim Lake’s “An American Concerto for Five-String Banjo and

Orchestra.” This concerto is influenced by Earl Scruggs and his three-finger bluegrass style of banjo picking, but is also influenced by the orchestration of Tchaikovsky other Romantic composers. This work opens Lydia Goehr’s model for the symphony orchestra by including the banjo. It also paves the way for other composers, and other non-traditional instruments, to further open the symphonic model.

A model that is open is one that is accepting of change. A closed model will not adhere to any changes. As Goehr states, “It is precisely the possibility of expansion and modification of conceptual meaning...that confirms the desired open nature of that concept.”⁶ Goehr is stating here that including more, and changing some things, allows an entity to be living, rather than dying. Doctor Lake, in his concerto, does precisely that. He is drawing not only from various periods of history, but is also referencing various segments of society to create one musical entity. The banjo references bluegrass music and Appalachian culture, and blends it with other types of music from diverse periods of time. This concerto demonstrates one way in which the symphonic model can be expanded and modified.

This piece has everything from sixteenth century counterpoint, to minimalism, and all points in between. Whether it's jazz

⁶ Goehr, “Being True to the Work” 61-62

chords, or Scruggs, we get to experience all of this with our banjos..⁷

Doctor Lake joins other innovators in opening the symphonic model. Mark Levine wrote a concerto for pedal steel guitar and orchestra, Mark O'Connor wrote his *fiddle* concerto for violin and orchestra, banjoist Bela Fleck has done several recordings with orchestra, and Bryce Dessner has written several pieces for electric guitar and orchestra. These are all attempts to change and expand notions of the symphonic concept that will hopefully work to keep the symphony orchestra alive and well. They sow the seeds for others to do so as well.

It appears that one of Tim Lake's purposes of this concerto is to reflect modern society. His stated purpose is to bring diverse styles, and people, together to form one entity. Doctor Lake states,

This piece is basically about immigration, people coming to America from all these different places in the world. I purposely did that, like with the castanets in the first movement, to give it a Spanish feel. One of the themes in the third movement I like to call Connemara. It's one of my favorite places in Ireland... Then there's a part at the end where it's

⁷ Tim Lake, Interview with the author, December 2, 2011

*really Eastern European, getting that harmonic
minor sound, so it's a gypsy sort of sound.*⁸

There is an underlying theme of inclusion of diverse peoples. Lake is, in a sense, attempting to revive the orchestra by musically bringing people from all cultures together.

At the same time that evolution of the orchestra is occurring, there are obstacles impeding change. Whenever a change occurs in any facet of life, there is a demand for adjustments in related areas. For example, when Doctor Lake was asked which genre his concerto fit into, the question illuminated one such obstacle. This piece didn't fit into a conventional classification.

*Back when you could buy CD's in a music store,
we had a problem. They'd put my banjo concerto
in the bluegrass section. I would say that it's
classical, and ask if they could put some copies in
the classical section. It is classical music, so it
really should be in the classical section. Now
sometimes, Joseph Beth here in Lexington would
put some in various different sections. I was glad
they did that, but most of the time all of my music
wound up in the bluegrass section.*⁹

⁸ Lake, Interview, 12/2/2011

⁹ Lake, Interview, 12/2/2011

This is an obstacle in the marketing of the music. Marketing is essential to the success and influence that music will assert as time passes. The degree of exposure which a particular work, or type of music receives will have an effect on the influence it has on subsequent musical endeavors. Goehr discusses the effects that historical events impose on music. She mentions the emergence of a new marketplace during the late eighteenth century, as a result of the newfound musical concept. The way in which music was consumed changed then, and it is in the throes of change now. As the traditional classifications of genre change and evolve, it is not known how current music will be classified with the advent of future changes in the music business.

The confusion described above concerning the proper location in which to put Doctor Lake's work can become a force in the evolution of music. In today's economic climate, profits are paramount. If Doctor Lake's concerto could not find an appropriate place in the CD stacks, the demand for such works might be affected. Marketability in general is essential to the survival of the symphony orchestra and to all genres. Just as the philosophical, political, and scientific factors in the late eighteenth century transformed the concept of musical works and the ways in which music was marketed, the same factors are affecting the music of today.

Apropos to the importance of economics, there is a need to make orchestras more popular, and therefore, more marketable. Doctor Lake brings up an important component affecting the popularity of orchestras. The schools

where musicians are trained can be very influential in changing perspective and popularizing the orchestra. Music departments in colleges and universities could be more aware of the music that is happening around them. A broader, flexible, more open concept of what is acceptable in the study of music is needed. Tim Lake comments on this issue,

It seemed to me, the more I studied music, that banjo players were good musicians, but five-string banjo players didn't really have orchestral music to play, and we really needed to start developing that sort of thing. We need it even more now. We really want banjo players to be able to come from Eastern Kentucky, or whatever, and bring their banjo, and come to the University of Kentucky, or Eastern Kentucky University, and be able to be admitted into the music school, and have their banjo and be able to study Bach and Beethoven, but bring Bill Monroe and Earl Scruggs with them, and be able to enhance the whole field of music.¹⁰

He goes on to describe his experience as a banjo player at the University of Kentucky.

I don't like the fact that you really can't bring a banjo into a music school as your instrument. I've had to leave my

¹⁰ Lake, Interview, 12/2/2011

*banjo in the copy room because they didn't want the banjo in the room where I was doing my defense...I don't know why it's like that, but the truth is, you have those sorts of things in the highest echelons of music, with the most educated people that you'd ever meet... If we had some banjo concertos, that might be a way of getting that started.*¹¹

If concertos, such as Doctor Lake's open up schools of music to young banjo players, then not only is the symphonic model opening, but so is the music education field. Bringing the players of these instruments, such as banjo, mandolin, fiddle, dobro, and steel guitar into the music schools will bring a whole new audience to symphony concerts. These players, and the appreciators of these musicians, will undoubtedly attend symphony concerts if their instruments were on the program. These people would also learn to develop an appreciation for Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms, as well. As said by Dr. Lake, "We wouldn't have people separated by the fact that this genre's bluegrass, or classical, or whatever. We'd be uplifting everybody."¹²

Accessibility is an important factor in popularizing symphonic music.

Doctor Lake comments, "I think we need to program music like my concerto out

¹¹ Lake, Interview, 12/2/2011

¹² Lake, Interview, 12/2/2011

in a park somewhere.”¹³ Innovative ways to allow the public to experience symphonic music, such as concertos for instruments like banjo, electric guitar, or fiddle are one way to get more people interested. In this economy, asking people to buy a high-priced ticket to sit in a dark auditorium might not be the best way of getting the music out to the public. Lydia Goehr’s description of the musical changes, such as the building of concert halls and the establishing of copyright laws, which were brought about by societal changes seem to portend changes to come in the future. In the late 18th century they constructed concert halls. The 21st century might bring about the tearing down of those halls as people access music in changing ways.

The opening up of the symphonic model is accomplished in a more recent example of a concerto for five-string banjo. Bela Fleck’s concerto for banjo was commissioned by the Nashville Symphony Orchestra and premiered on September 22, 2011. The Nashville Symphony Orchestra seems to be working towards opening the symphonic model by commissioning concertos such as this. They also commissioned a concerto for Tracy Silverman to play on six-string electric violin.

Doctor Lake’s work for five-string banjo is a public, and permanently existing artifact made up of musical elements, and is fixed to the properties indicated in its score.¹⁴ These attributes link his work to the works-concept that arose in the late 18th century, which implies that works are permanent and

¹³ IBID

¹⁴ Goehr, “Being True to the Work,” 55

repeatable. Although it is out of the ordinary to have a banjo performing a written concerto with orchestral accompaniment, it once was out of the ordinary to have such instruments as trombone, tuba, and viola, which are all standard members of the orchestra at this point in time, all with their own solo literature with orchestral accompaniment. When asked if he felt that he accomplished the goals that he set out to accomplish when he wrote the piece, he stated, "It's documented, people can hear it."¹⁵ This fits directly into Goehr's "work concept".

It is helpful to consider the techniques that Doctor Lake used to incorporate the banjo into the traditional orchestral setting. Doctor Lake's work begins with a Tristan Chord like German Augmented sixth in the orchestra, and the banjo playing the ever familiar "foggy mountain roll." This continues for a few bars, before the banjo breaks out into a fiddle tune melodic theme. Playing "melodically" on the banjo is a technique developed by banjo virtuoso Bill Keith. This gives the banjoist the option of playing in scalar patterns, instead of roll patterns. Much of this concerto is based on this style of banjo playing.

There are several themes throughout the concerto that are fairly interesting to hear played on banjo. One of these is what Doctor Lake refers to as "Connemara." This theme has distinctly Irish roots, but ends with a sound that one would liken to gypsies, and Eastern Europe. There is also a theme at

¹⁵ Lake, Interview, 12/2/2011

the end that involves a lot of the harmonic minor to get a gypsy-like sound that usually isn't heard in the realm of the five-string banjo.

When asked about why he wanted to write a concerto for the five-string banjo, Doctor Lake replies, "You can find concertos for other instruments that aren't necessarily orchestral instruments..."¹⁶

It is in this fashion that the symphonic model gets opened up. Once composers have gotten used to the idea of writing for banjo, and a repertoire for banjo and orchestra is built up more, the model will be wide open for other instruments from other cultures, and genres, to begin building their own repertoire, further opening the symphonic model, and including even more potential symphony-goers.

Beethoven opened up the model by adding three trombones to his fifth symphony. Before this, trombones were thought of as the instrument that announced a death. After Beethoven, the trombone became a standard member of the symphony orchestra. Banjo could be the next addition.

Although people like Doctor Lake are participating in the movement to open the symphonic model, there are many who resist that movement and tend to keep it closed. When Doctor Lake has tried to get his concerto for five-string banjo programmed, he has been rejected time and time again. Because of the lack of banjo literature, among other things, people didn't want to program his concerto. Of modern symphonies, Doctor Lake states,

¹⁶ Lake, Interview, 12/2/2011

I really would like to see symphonies put a little space between themselves and Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms to allow a chance for other things to come up. I think, a lot of times, this becomes a problem because they have to put people in the seats. All orchestras survive on contributions, plus the National Endowment for the Arts, and of course, a lot of that has been cut. I don't think there is an orchestra out there that survives on it's own through ticket sales alone.¹⁷

As Lydia Goehr says, "A concept can become so entrenched within a given practice that it comes to take on all the airs and graces of necessity."¹⁸ But why close the model? Just because something has been done one way since the Romantic Period doesn't mean that is the only way to do it. She also states,

When we speak of works we do not think immediately of jazz, folk, or popular music, nor of music serving as an accompaniment to other art forms, such as film and dance music...But this does not

¹⁷ Lake, Interview, 12/2/2011

¹⁸ Goehr, "Being True to the Work" 56

*exclude the possibility of thinking about these kinds of music in terms of works*¹⁹

With this, we include the possibility of not only Doctor Lake's concerto under Goehr's definition of a musical work, but any music, for any instrument, or combination thereof, to fall under that category. If this is the case, then all bluegrass music could fall into the category of a musical work, although most bluegrass is very improvised, so the chances of it being played the same way twice are very slim.

Most of the music that has been composed with the five-string banjo in mind was not meant for the concert hall. These tunes, and works, in the case of music such as Earl Scruggs's banjo instrumentals, were meant to be played at festivals, and other events that allowed dancing. Doctor Lake's concerto was written with the concert hall in mind. This work, in the style of most concertos, with three movements, and orchestral accompaniment, is in neo-romantic style

Although this concerto hasn't been performed a lot, Doctor Lake has played it several times, with several different orchestras. This, along with the Levine Triple Concerto for Pedal Steel Guitar, and the O'Connor Fiddle Concerto for Violin and Orchestra, break the model wide open for composers, orchestras, and individual musicians of the present and future.

The study of music and its evolution through history is a fascinating endeavor. Lydia Goehr asserts that one period in history, the Romantic period,

¹⁹ Goehr, *Being True to the Work*, 58

changed our perspective on music so entirely that it has changed the lens through which musical works are perceived. This new perspective applies not only to music from the Romantic period forward, but includes the music that existed before this change in musical concept took place. As the opposing forces of maintaining tradition, versus the creating of change continue, new and old blend to create the trends that will be analyzed in the future. Doctor Lake's concerto for five-string banjo and orchestra has a place in the music history of the future. His contribution will serve to create modern trends. It remains to be seen how the orchestral tradition as we know it today, will evolve. The modern day symphony orchestra is truly perched as precariously as a fiddler on the roof, unless, of course, he is joined by Doctor Tim Lake on the banjo.

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