

Dear Samuel,

after talking about scores and pieces and naming, I would like to ask you:

For you, do pieces have something to do with each other, in the sense of not just existing by themselves, as individual entities, but being related to each other, communicating with each other, affirming or contradicting each other, being part of a (family-like or community-like) constellation?

Also, does it make sense for you to think of your work not just as a collection of works / pieces, but as an “oeuvre”?

Sounds like 2 questions, but I think it is one.

Yours,

Antoine

Dear Antoine,

Thank you for your questions! They are one indeed, though not the same question. I'll answer the first question (half question?) wholeheartedly in the affirmative, but the second question I find more problematic.

For me, it's definitely true that pieces of mine relate to other pieces of mine. If only because they are related to everything that the context of the occasion of the piece carries with it, and that always includes whatever else I have written.

But it's true on a more explicit level as well. Often, a piece will start out in my mind as a variation of some earlier piece. As I develop an idea that seems latent in the earlier piece for the context of the new piece, I gradually discover that the new piece is, in fact, a very different piece.

Or, when thinking about how to solve some particular technical or poetical problem, I will repeatedly go over all previous works that I have written that have some bearing on the present piece, and “test” my imagination for the new piece against the diversity of solutions that I used in the earlier pieces.

Also, having composed a piece, and having experienced how it operates in the world, the piece will often suggest new questions to investigate, leading into the next piece.

Now as I develop more and more pieces as variations on earlier pieces, my concerns increasingly give the impression of having branched apart very far. In my mind, I'm constantly comparing approaches between individual pieces, but not all pairs of pieces seem to lend themselves equally well to being compared; and the set of all the pieces that I have done as a whole does not seem to have any kind of common measure; at least, not in a way that is clear to me.

My student works are very different from my mature works, for example; and among those, my work ranges from relatively straightforward modernist ensemble music to the kind of pieces I now find myself writing for our present conversation. And it doesn't end there, of course, as my activities continue to expand into fields other than music as such.

I feel, then, that, if my "oeuvre" exists, I don't know the principle of its unity. It probably does exist, though, since I can always make the connections and operate using connections. But I feel that it's not up to me to determine my oeuvre, the way I do feel it's up to me to determine individual pieces.

My oeuvre is the conversation among my pieces, and it's a conversation that includes me, but probably not as the chair!

Which leaves me wondering to what extent I might speculate on what or who might be chairing the conversation instead? What might the status be of the guiding ideas – they do exist, they keep recurring and having developments of their own – even though I never feel I have ever really grasped them?

Best,
Samuel