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Restoring the Ecosystem of American Classical Music through Audience Empowerment

by

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Restoring the Ecosystem of American Classical Music through Audience Empowerment

It is virtually impossible to have a gathering of symphony orchestra organization participants or orchestral devotees without having the subject of new music arise. Board members discuss new music, musicians discuss new music, staff members discuss new music, and audience members certainly discuss new music, often in unflattering terms.

Our essayist, American composer Soong Fu-Yuan, suggests that audience alienation from and indifference to new music is a serious root ailment for symphony orchestra organizations. He opens his essay with a history lesson, reviewing his take on how the new music "ecosystem" has been disrupted.

Reestablishing Respect for New Music

Soong suggests that the only way to reestablish proper respect for new compositions is to give audiences an opportunity to express opinions formally about what they hear—in his words—"audience empowerment." To this he adds performer selection and logical incentives as principles to be implemented. He then sets a theoretical framework for consideration of the three principles.

Competition is Key

The essay then turns to concrete examples of ways in which the three principles might be applied. Soong outlines a competition for new chamber music, as well as one for commissioning new works for orchestras. He also suggests ways to rethink composer-in-residence programs, and argues that classical music radio stations should also be involved.

The ideas presented in this essay may raise an eyebrow or two. Nothing could make Soong happier!

Restoring the Ecosystem of American Classical Music through Audience Empowerment

Despite an abundance of brilliant performing artists and despite a renewed interest in fields such as opera, hardly a week goes by without some discussion about how classical music is ailing in America: the graying of the audience, the difficulties of finding new audiences, or the shrinking classical music recording market and the loss of a recording contract by some orchestra. One even reads, from time to time, about the impending death of classical music itself. It is my contention that, indeed, a serious root ailment exists. If not cured, this disease, like a cancer, will cause the demise of the classical music field. The disease is the alienation and indifference of the classical music audience towards new music.

In every other endeavor of performing arts the new and the old stand side by side in a healthy proportion, with the new being the flag bearer. Popular music, movies, theater, and dance are all spearheaded by new creations. Classical music stands alone in operating overwhelmingly on the strength of dead composers. Can it keep on doing so forever?

Even though serialism and the avant-garde of the 1960s and 1970s, whose arid and artificial music drove listeners away en masse and to a state of total apathy, have relaxed their grip, and even though the words “audience accessibility” have been heard everywhere in the last 10 years, audiences for new music have not come back in large numbers. They have remained largely indifferent to new music. Most professional ensembles still present only small doses of contemporary music, amateur chamber groups almost never play contemporary music, and with rare exceptions, specialized ensembles that devote themselves to contemporary music are isolated into small, inbred circles, their performances attended by very few from the classical music audience at large. Why? Because the reforms have been superficial. The true cause of the malady has not been rectified. Despite the fact that a bewildering variety of new music is being

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presented today, the root ailment has not been cured: the audience had no voice, and it still has no voice.

New music is simply thrown at the audience by the presenter or music director and reviewed only by the critics (or more often, a single critic). The audience's opinions are never solicited or heard anywhere except among friends. Music organizations care about audience attendance, but they do not seek audience opinion. In fact, many seem to have a deep distrust of the taste and preferences of the audience. The audience is the client of musical organizations. In a free market, the client is the motivating power, the vehicle for growth and regeneration. Therefore, if the system of classical music is to be valid, the audience must be empowered. Clients must be given choices about the products they want to buy, especially new products.

Tampering with and Disrupting an Ecosystem

It is important to realize what happened many decades ago. The classical music world is comparable to a delicately balanced and self-renewing ecosystem that consists of creation, or composition of new music, which provides a constant infusion of exciting new music; re-creation, or performance, which presents new and old music to the audience in beautiful and exciting ways; and regeneration, or audience feedback, which, in turn, provides the financial resources necessary for the nurturing of the field as a whole.

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If any of these three components is dysfunctional, the self-renewing cycle breaks down. For example, if a performing group is terrible, the audience will not buy tickets to hear it, thus forcing the demise of that group. If a new composition is terrible, performers will refuse to play it, thus forcing the composer to produce a better composition or give up composing. And if a performer insists on performing a terrible composition, the audience will leave and demand a refund. In effect, an upward pressure for higher quality new works and performances exists naturally within this ecosystem.

In the 1950s and 1960s, some composer-theorists convinced a number of prestigious academic institutions and large foundations of a then fashionable idea: since experimental endeavors aimed at advancement in various fields are not concerned with users in the short term, new music, like scientific experiments, should not be concerned with audiences. These composer-theorists argued that new music should be funded independent of audience support in order to concentrate on the advancement of music, which marched inexorably forward. The institutions and foundations subscribed to that theory and funded experimental new music heavily, and for decades, with no audience support. Thus, the institutions inadvertently disenfranchised the audience and disrupted the ecosystem of classical music.

Composers were no longer accountable to an audience. Their clients were institutions, not audiences. But, unlike composers of yore who composed for the pleasure of a privileged few in the church and the aristocracy, these composers composed for the pleasure of none, for the sponsoring institutions were not interested in hearing music. They funded ideas.

The performers of new music, too, were no longer accountable to the audience, since their performances were underwritten by the institutions. As a result, what audiences liked in new music no longer counted at all. Through the long decades, the initial faulty rationale created a systemic corruption. The illogical practices generated by this corruption go on unabated today. At the very root, the cause of the ailment lies in the collapse of the ecosystem of classical music with its natural incentives, its checks and balances.

High Art Versus Commercialism

Some readers will argue that I speak out of ignorance of the nature of high art. Commercialism panders to the audience, high art does not. Certain forms of music are called commercial music because their purpose is to sell to the largest audience. If we cater to the audience, classical music will no longer be a form of high art. It will become commercial music, these readers will say.

Let's compare a television commercial jingle with a Chopin ballade. I think no one will question which one is high art, and which is not. Yet both must pass the test of audience validation. The fact that both Chopin and the jingle must be validated by listeners does not make them the same. More importantly, the fact that products must be validated by their users really has nothing to do with whether they pander to the users. By this, I mean that unlike commercial music, where mass marketing is the supreme goal, thus making copying, plagiarizing, or pandering to mass tastes legitimate practices, in high art the creator creates something new and inspires the listeners. Chopin's music was not dictated by a poll of what the public wanted. But he, along with all prophets of our civilization, was validated by the users (listeners), some immediately, some in due time.

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Pandering to the classical music audience by some presenting and performing organizations has led, paradoxically, to the decline in concert attendance today. These organizations, believing that the classical music audience prefers to hear only the standard repertoire, decided to give the audience what it wanted. And what was their reward? Dwindling audience attendance. One may compare these presenters to doting parents who grant every wish of their pampered child, only to find that the child is dissatisfied and unhappy; or to the president of a country who, instead of leading the country, takes a poll of the people's

preferences every week and follows them, only to be voted out by the people at the next election.

Three Principles for Reestablishing a Valid System

The principal task of a valid system is to give back to the audience its proper leverage. Only then will the ecosystem of creation, re-creation, and regeneration

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have a chance to restore itself. In order to provide this leverage, I suggest three principles to be implemented in all programs involving new music. They are: “audience empowerment,” “performer selection,” and “logical incentives.” In discussing these principles, I ask the reader to keep in mind the following analogy: composers, in a sense, are comparable to manufacturers of products that are selected by merchandisers (performers) to sell to clients (the audience). (“Sell”, by its implication of free choice and motivation for improvement, is a very illuminating word, and should not be taken to be an epithet indicating crass commercialism.) From time to time as you read on, try substituting “merchandiser selection” for “performer selection,” “client satisfaction” for “audience empowerment,” and “self-interest” for “logical incentives.” With this in mind, one can easily understand how these principles work together and

how they depend upon one another. For example, if I stated “Performer selection makes sense only when coupled with audience empowerment,” a reader might find the reasoning a bit obscure. However, if one interprets the statement as, “Merchandiser selection makes no sense without client satisfaction,” then the logic becomes self-evident.

Audience Empowerment

Audience empowerment is the centerpiece of my thesis. The audience will have leverage when monetary awards, jobs, and performances of new music are tied to audience approval. When this happens, the audience will be empowered. With this empowerment will come wide audience interest and superior new music.

Audience empowerment is the factor that is universally ignored today. Despite the awareness of dwindling attendance at concerts of classical music and all the attention paid to developing new audiences, young audiences, and minority audiences, and despite the hue and cry that new music should be more responsive to the audience, in the American new music world, unbelievably, the audience has yet to be given any voice when it comes to evaluation of new works and awarding of positions and money to composers.

Audience empowerment restores the natural ecosystem in classical music. With that restoration, all elements in the system will work toward survival of the

fittest, pushing the whole field upward. Audience feedback, the third segment of the cycle and what provides the economic power of the classical music world, must be restored to its rightful place of power and influence over the first segment, the creation of new music, just as client demand in business affects the manufacture of merchandise.

Performer Selection

With audience empowerment as the basic principle, the initial selection of new music should be done by performers. All those who sing, play, or conduct should have a voice in the selection of new music, not just the music director. There are two reasons for this. First, all performers are merchandisers who must present and sell the product to the clients (the audience). If they have a voice in selecting the product, they will present it with conviction and enthusiasm. Second, one individual musician's judgment of new music may be tainted by either habitual preference for the conservative or indoctrination towards the avant-garde, or anything in between. The collective judgment of many performers will even out these prejudices and provide a good picture of the worth of the music.

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Like the merchandiser who gets a commission when the product sells, the selector-performer should get a share of the cash awards for the new composition chosen by the audience. The purpose is to give logical incentives to the performers. The performers will work hard to seek out superior new works and perform them well, if doing so is in their self-interest.

Performers, on the whole, are good judges of new music because they are able to discern the musicality of a given work in an instinctive way. In addition, they are knowledgeable about music literature. They can spot music of novice quality, imitations, and outright plagiarism, and can sense if a piece has something refreshing, exciting, or individual to express. Here is one of the areas where high art distinguishes itself from pure commercialism. Performers, being artists and music lovers themselves, will not knowingly choose plagiarism or pastiche even if they think it would sell well.

Logical Incentives

Logical incentives are the hidden force that make everything work in any free market. Incentives may be cash, position, recognition, power, pleasure, or just survival. When the system is dysfunctional, there are no incentives to do well, or disincentives that lead to further disintegration of the system. An example: most performers have little incentive to spend much time practicing new music because they feel compelled to devote time to practicing music from the standard repertoire, thereby enhancing their careers. As shown later, logical incentives can work miracles in curing these ills.

How the Three Principles Work Together

The application of the combined principles can generate new programs or be applied to existing ones. These programs should all incorporate the following:

- ◆ Put audience empowerment at the root of every program in new music. That is, let all cash awards and commissions be tied to new works or composers that have received audience approval;
- ◆ Let the selector-performers share the awards given to the works approved by the audience; and
- ◆ Ensure that the composer, performer, organizer, audience, and everyone else involved has logical incentives to do well.

Some Theoretical Considerations

Before offering some scenarios that demonstrate how these principles could work, I want to address some doubts and questions that may have arisen in readers' minds.

Some readers will argue that in the sciences and other fields, we rely on the guidance of experts, and that if we give leverage to the audience in the choice and rewarding of new music, we will have not only invalid results, but also pandemonium. How is it that I say expert opinion in the new music field is not as reliable as that of laymen?

During the 20th century, there has been a gradual metamorphosis in new music, from the breaking away from 19th-century traditions to newness and change for its own sake—from a musical progress to an intellectual one. When new music became dominated by intellectual considerations, its foundation became totally dependent on the logic upon which it was built. What if there were false links in the logic? The world of new music then would become a house of cards built on an extremely shaky foundation; a house that could collapse at any time. For this reason, experts in new music must possess not only a broad knowledge of facts, but a deep understanding of how music works, and unflinching logic every step of the way.

For a long time, experts told audiences that serialism and the aleatory avant-garde were the flag bearers of Western classical music. In time, electronic music was accepted into that elite company. In the 1980s, many experts accepted minimalism—a system whose philosophy and methods are both diametrically opposed to serialism and avant-gardism—into

mainstream classical music. Later, Bang on a Can, combining a post-minimal structure with dissonant sonorities (some call it European minimalism), was similarly accepted. Some critics say popular music is the classical music of the future. Meanwhile, serial and electronic music still have their advocates. Today, just about everybody in music knows that all the theorizing is meaningless.

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There is no objective logic running through all of this. There is no consistency, only trends that contradict each other. There is no God of opinion in new music. The house of cards has collapsed.

Music is, in the final analysis, an instinctive and non verbal language that is an essential expression by all people, no matter how primitive or advanced. I think it is more logical to argue that the instinctive understanding of this language and instinctive judgment of its merits (such as that of the audience) is ultimately more dependable than that of those experts who have learned to distrust their own instincts.

The classical music audience's taste is by no means error free. In addition to individual errors stemming from ignorance, audience judgment varies a great deal depending on personal tastes and experiences. That does not mean, however, that the audience is incapable of choosing a work of merit or discerning a work that has no musical substance. And even though many individuals in the audience may err, it is my belief that today, taken as a whole, they err far less often and seriously than do the experts.

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Life-Enriching Substance

Some may say that advanced music, like advanced science or even an advanced chess game, is too complex for the layman to follow, and hence the small audiences of experts and aficionados are to be expected. But science works, and the advanced chess player wins. Or consider advanced cuisine. The more advanced the chef, the more delicious the food tastes to the layman. Laymen should be able to comprehend advanced music the same way they comprehend advanced pianists and singers; the more advanced the pianists and singers, the more attractive the music sounds to the ordinary listener. I submit that the scarcity of audiences for new music is not because the music is too advanced, but is caused by a lack of what I call “Life-Enriching Substance” (LES) that provides the internal attraction for those who love classical music.

What is LES? It is something that makes one's life richer and more meaningful. It is not limited to music or even the arts. It is what attracts people to experiences of all kinds, be they baseball games, movies, or walks in the woods. These experiences vary greatly in kind, in depth, and in degrees of pleasure. The enchantment we experience in listening to our favorite music may be quite different from the pleasure of playing a game of tennis. But these experiences attract us because they enrich our lives and make us glad to be alive.

Among the classical music audience, there may be a small number who attend concerts for purely social reasons. However, I believe the overwhelming majority of concertgoers do so out of their love for music. They want to be excited, entertained, or moved. In other words, they want to find LES for that

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moment in their lives. I believe that listeners often go to a concert of new music and get bored, not because the music is different, but because there is not sufficient LES.

Sounds become music only when they elicit a typically human response, called a musical response, in the listener or the performer. The love of music requires no intellectual explanation. It is an essential physical element from which all intellectual development must emanate. Listeners stay away

because they do not hear sounds that are music to their ears. For decades, we were so indoctrinated and intimidated by some intellectuals that even to talk about feelings in new music was considered maudlin and somewhat shameful. The primary purpose for writing music is not to contribute to the advancement of music. It is to enrich life through a natural human impulse. Any advancement that is not rooted in this impulse has lost the reason for its own being.

The Three Principles Applied

Let's now consider some ideas and examples of how the three principles of audience empowerment, performer selection, and logical incentives might work to change the dynamics of the music world. Resourceful organizers, if they agree with my rationale and want things to happen, can think of many more.

To empower the audience, the first task is to learn of its choices. There should be a uniform rating system through which the audience could evaluate all new works. Listeners could thus indicate not only what they think of a new piece, but also how it stands in relation to their favorite pieces in the standard repertoire. They could be polled at each concert where a new work is performed, and the results published. Today, advanced polling methods and electronic devices would make the instantaneous polling, tallying, and summarizing of the results quite possible. Rating systems and devices must be designed so that they are not only accurate, but also are convenient for audiences and organizers alike. The planning and expense would be well worth it, considering that such a plan could bring about a fundamental change in audience dynamics. When the voice of the audience is clearly heard, performing and funding institutions, as well as private donors, can give that voice additional leverage by associating performances, commissions, and cash awards with audience approval. This makes possible the following examples.

A Competition for New Chamber Music

Today many well-known and excellent chamber groups are reluctant to play new music. Scores sent to them are often shelved for later review, which could be years later. From these groups' points of view the reasons, besides audiences' spotty attendance and lukewarm reaction, are not hard to see. If they perform the standard repertoire, the review will concentrate on their performance. If they play new music, the review will focus on the new piece. Often the performer

doesn't like the new music and only plays it as a job. Why work hard preparing a piece that is unlikely to be repeated? Why waste time on interpretation if the audience can't tell the difference?

However, if a large cash prize were to be established at a chamber music festival for the best new work—as determined by vote by the audience—with the prize shared by the composer and the players of the winning work, the dynamics would change immediately. Groups of chamber players would seek out new works from every source, including the unsolicited scores so long ignored, in order to find new music that they feel would have the best chance to win. They would work hard to perfect the piece and make the performance as attractive as possible. Audience interest and enthusiasm would increase greatly. Publicity would naturally surround such a competitive event.

This transformation from the reluctant performer to the active seeker and perfectionist of new music, a virtually impossible feat at present, would be accomplished by giving the performers the needed self-motivation. Audience empowerment is the root of this motivating force. The performers' instinctive trust in the collective judgment of the audience will make them seek out new music and work hard to communicate it.

Commissioning New Works for Orchestra and a National Competition

In the 1940s, when Bela Bartok was ill and insolvent, Serge Koussevitzky commissioned him to compose a piece of music for \$1,000. The result was the *Concerto for Orchestra*, which has been performed thousands of times since and recorded by practically all major orchestras. Over the last several decades, there have been thousands of commissions to composers. Yet it is difficult to think of any resulting work that entered the standard repertoire. It is clear that for a very long period, the commissioning system has not been producing its intended result. The performances of all new music and cash awards to composers in America are in the hands of very few people, namely music directors, panels of experts, and resident composers who act as new music advisers. There is no accountability for either the commissioned or the commissioner. There is scarcely any expectation beyond the completion and the premiere of the new work. You might say that the merchandise is always prepaid regardless of quality or success. The following is an example of how the three principles I have enumerated could be applied in a national event that would generate much public interest and publicity while incorporating and transforming the commissioning system.

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Orchestras in different cities might embark on a three-year program which combines commission and competition. First, they would send out an open call for submission of scores of, say, three minutes of music. All composers would be eligible. All scores, as long as they were clearly written and the parts prepared, would be read through by the orchestra in reading sessions. All orchestra members, as well as the music director, would vote on the works submitted. In this initial screening, most would be quickly eliminated, and a number of pieces would be chosen by the players for better acquaintance. The composers of these selected pieces would be awarded a small amount of cash (say up to \$5,000) and asked to submit a piece or section of a piece of five to ten minutes, to be played in several concerts during the next season. Subscribers would be invited to attend these concerts free of charge and vote for the works of their preference. The players and music directors would vote as well, and their vote would weigh fifty-fifty with that of the audience. The composers of the most highly rated pieces would then receive standard commissions of, say, \$25,000 or more from the orchestras involved, with the work to be completed in a year.

These commissioned works would be performed at well-publicized concerts, during which the audiences would select pieces to receive additional large grand prizes. The winning work in each city would then be entered into a nationally televised competition, judged electronically by audiences across the nation, as well as in concert halls. A very large prize fund might be established for the three best works, to be split, say, 60 percent, 30 percent, and 10 percent, and to be shared by the winning composers and organizations. With such events, tremendous public excitement could be generated, and there would be no lack of corporate sponsors.

Some may say, logistical difficulties aside, there just are not that many composers and new works that are capable of exciting audiences to levels that I envision. If the exciting music isn't there, all the planning and good intentions matter little. I agree that the audience should not be compelled to bestow awards on music that they are not enthusiastic about, and there should be some safeguards in designing the programs. I do believe, however, that there would be plentiful new music that is beautiful and exciting to the audience. In America today, there are more brilliant performers than in 19th-century Europe. It is inconceivable that there is not an abundance of creative talent. How the composer composes is influenced greatly by the people who hand out awards and paying

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positions. When performers are the selectors and the audience is the ultimate client, composers will adjust very quickly in order to survive and advance. New creative talent will emerge.

Reimagining Composer-in-Residence Programs

Residency programs for composers with orchestras, opera companies, and chamber music organizations should be among the most effective tools for introducing new music to the American public and for encouraging the creation of new works.

Twenty-one major American orchestras participated in the 1982-1992 Meet the Composer orchestra residencies program. The stated goal was to “restore composers to a central role in the life of the orchestra.” After 10 years (by which time the goal was to have been accomplished) funding for the continuation of the residencies was to be provided by the orchestras themselves. At the conclusion of the program in 1992, only a handful of orchestras opted to continue the residency program in their orchestras.

In 10 years, 29 composers composed 65 works for the orchestras, or an average of 2.2 works per composer. Yet they reviewed more than 15,000 scores, or more than 517 scores per composer. Why did they write so few and review so many? The answer is that, because there was so little interest in new music and the residents’ music, the chief job of the resident composer became that of a new music advisor and a virtual gatekeeper for the host organization, a vehicle for rejecting unsolicited scores. In addition, instead of integrating new music into the standard repertoire, some orchestras created segregated concerts of contemporary music curated by the resident composer that, on the whole, attracted only specialized audiences.

Suppose that instead of the above arrangement, each orchestra had resident composers in its midst chosen by all members of the orchestra and the audience, similar to the manner described in an earlier example. An orchestra could team up with its resident composers to participate in nationally televised competitions. The anticipation and excitement of audiences in various cities as they root for their teams would be palpable. Thus, the force of large cash awards tied to audience-judged competitions would strongly induce a total meritocracy in residency programs, such as we see in the most efficient and productive segments of our society.

Engaging the Classical Radio Audience

Classical music radio stations could easily design audience-judged competitions of new works, perhaps held on a regular weekly basis, with cash prizes and repeat broadcasts awarded to the composer of the audience-preferred piece. Listeners could register their votes over the telephone or through the mail. This would be a very good opportunity for classical music stations—especially listener-supported stations—to expand and build new audiences.

And a Word About Opera

The basic symptoms of illness that afflict classical music in general are also present in the opera world. Opera companies rely for their bread and butter on even fewer “war horses” than do orchestras and chamber music groups. No new works have entered the permanent repertoire for decades. In fact, after their premiere performances, new works seldom receive revivals. The creation of new operas is dependent upon commissions which are not accountable to the audience. Using the same principles that I have applied to the creation of works for orchestras, there could also be a variety of innovative ways that opera organizations could involve performers and audiences in the commissioning of new works, which will help to bring attractive new operas into the permanent repertoire.

Summary

It should be clear by now that the principles I have proposed are not unusual. Rather, they encompass a return from an abnormal state that has lasted a long time—so long that we accept abominable conditions without questioning, like people who have lived a lifetime under tyranny. The abominable conditions are merely symptoms that will not disappear until the root cause of the illness is found and the proper antidote is prescribed. The root cause is the disenfranchisement of the audience. When the clients' choices have no influence on a product they use, they refuse to buy the product. That product, which in classical music is new compositions, continues to be produced through artificial financial support without usefulness, as it has been for decades. Right now those in power still stubbornly refuse to know of, let alone pay attention to, the clients' choices. This disenfranchisement is leading to the disintegration of the classical music system, which owes its existence to past creative geniuses and needs fresh inspiration from the present and future ones. The situation of products without clients should not and cannot continue. The antidote is audience empowerment.

Only through empowerment of the audience can we restore the health of the ecosystem of classical music. In a healthy state, things could be pretty exciting. There would be a constant stream of new music to which audiences flock to listen, because creative genius, more than anything, nurtures the soul of mankind. The principles of audience empowerment, performer selection, and logical incentives will catalyze an important change in the dynamics of the new music society, which ought to be the most exciting branch of the classical music world. We would change from “compose for commission, perform for pay,” to “make beautiful music and get rewarded.” This, in essence, constitutes true responsiveness to the audience. More importantly, it conforms to the ultimate *raison-d'être* of music. Let's give it a try.

Soong Fu-Yuan is an American composer who has lived in the United States his entire adult life.