

Germany, New Chamber Music for Music Schools – tested in practice 2001-2004

'New chamber music for music schools – tested in practice' is an initiative of the German Music Schools' Association (*Verband Deutscher Musikschulen - VdM*). The project objective is the ongoing promotion of contemporary music for music school ensembles. Succinctly put, this is achieved by compiling, sampling and choosing contemporary chamber music for music school ensembles and supervising instructors. The project was initiated in the 2001/2002 school year and is to be repeated in 2003/2004.

Background

During the music school conference in 1999, the central theme of the panel discussion was how to find appropriate contemporary music for school ensembles. During the discussion it became apparent that music schools must offer students access to contemporary music in addition to introducing them to the longstanding tried and tested repertoire.

Concept

Conceptually speaking, the project is based on the notion that the VdM can make it easier for instructors and students alike to discover new music by awarding works regarded as highly suited to music schools with a designation or rating. Furthermore, works are to be selected that are considered appropriate for the difficulty rating *Unterstufe II* ('Primary II') and *Mittelstufe I* ('Secondary I')¹. When choosing works, one consideration is: to what extent does the composition afford children the opportunity to come into contact with a wealth of different facets of contemporary music? For example, compositions with minimalist elements, or opportunities for improvisation; works from musicals involving mime, visuals and speech; and compositions requiring unusual instruments. Works for a variable strength are supremely suited, not only on account of their flexible nature but also because the pieces can be used at various levels of difficulty.

Instructor supervision is a result of - and a supplement to - this programme. Relevant topics include: ensemble direction, conducting techniques, information on the various instruments, types of musical notation and playing techniques, including improvisation and practising and performing. The programme is set up in four phases. Instructors practise the chosen works with the student ensembles in between the phases and offer the students the chance to hone their interpretation skills by attending workshops with the composer.

Objectives

- Long-lasting improvement of contemporary music for student ensembles.
- Improve and promote ensemble contemporary music lessons in the music schools.

Description

In the autumn of 2000, the VdM encouraged publishers and composers to submit their works to VdM-affiliated music schools for evaluation. The following criteria applied to the works:

- The work was written in 1990 or later.
- The work is intended for three to eight musicians, preferably in a mixed strength.
- The degree of difficulty is easy to moderate.

The VdM appointed a Readers' Committee to evaluate the works submitted. Out of more than 360 pieces, the committee chose 18 "highly suitable" and 23 "suitable" works. The works selected are suitable for a wide variety of strengths ranging from recorder quartet to clarinet trio, horns, string ensembles or varied strength.

¹ Music school education comprises a *Grundstufe* ('basic') section that generally lasts two years. Students receive classical training and the primary objective is to lay the foundation for continuing education, which consists of three levels: *Unterstufe* ('primary') and *Mittelstufe* ('secondary'), both of which last approximately four years, and *Oberstufe* ('advanced'), which has no time limitation.

In response to announcements placed in VdM internal media and calls for submissions made during the music school conference in Leipzig, 120 ensembles from 53 different music schools expressed interest in testing the selected works. The test phase ran from September 2001 to April 2002. The project received exceptional support from the publishers who provided the music schools with 240 copies of sheet music. A weekend workshop offered ensemble leaders support and gave them extensive information and additional motivation.

Following test phase completion, the ensemble leaders were asked to give their opinions and describe their experiences with the works by completing a written survey. Questions included, 'Was the composition too easy or too difficult?'; 'How did the ensemble activities take shape?'; 'Could you understand the musical notation?'; 'Does the piece include enough in the way of explanation by the composer to be able to gain an impression of the new soundscape?' The feasibility of the compositions for music school ensembles was the overall criterion of the evaluation. Ten works rated as highly suitable now bear the rating 'Tested in practice: recommended by the VdM'. Based on the results of the survey accompanying the 'New chamber music for music schools' initiative, it appears that a large number of instructors required follow-up training in contemporary music methodology and didactics. The new playing techniques on various instruments in particular have created a need for specialised instructors. In response, the VdM has taken heed of the many suggestions and ideas and in cooperation with three other organisations developed a supervisory model for professional guidance regarding ensemble direction for new chamber music.

In the autumn of 2002 the VdM called for a second round of composition submissions. The programme is following the same time schedule as the original. Also, there is enough information to start compiling an informative catalogue designed to help educators in choosing contemporary chamber music.

Organisation and Publicity

The VdM worked together with the following organisations to develop follow-up teacher training: *Bundesakademie für musikalische Jugendbildung Trossingen* (the state academy of children's music education in Trossingen), *Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung* (the ministry of research and education) and the *Robert-Schumann Hochschule Düsseldorf* (Robert Schumann college in Düsseldorf). Publicity for the recruitment of publishers, composers and school ensembles was coordinated mainly using internal (multi) media and music school conferences.

Results

Tangible results include: an increase in ensemble lessons on contemporary music; a list of highly suitable pieces ([excellent works 2002](#)); a catalogue in the making that lists the VdM-recommended compositions; a follow-up training offer; and a website forum (<http://www.musikschulen.de/foren/index.php3>)

Information

For more information, please contact Doris Froes (00 49 703 260 91) or Dr Markus Quabeck (00 49 228 95 706 29, 8:00-13:00).

You can also find the list of recommended works and other information on the VdM website. Surf to <http://www.musikschulen.de> and click on the *Projekte und Initiativen* button, then on the *Neue Kammermusik* button.