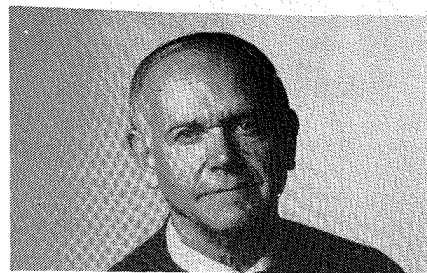


The Battisti Interview — 2

The Neglected Consumer



Continuing his talk with the Editor at the Royal Northern College of Music, Manchester during the July 1991 WASBE Conference, WASBE Founder Frank Battisti considers the needs and responsibilities of the audience.

One of the criticisms levelled at many of our Conferences and which may be made of this one is that there is too much music of an esoteric kind

But just look at the three concerts we heard yesterday. The first one (Australian National Wind Band) was a Pops concert pure and simple. Then we had a brass band (Britannia Building Society Band) to give a kind of mix of things. And then we had a contemporary music program (RNCM Wind Orchestra). If there isn't something there for everybody, I don't know where you're going to find it. I didn't have to go to the Pops concert if I didn't want to. I hope I would be open enough to say, 'I want to.' But no one is saying to anyone that they *have* to go to anything or everything. It's a bazaar. And as long as that bazaar has a variety of offerings, then we can choose what we want to listen to.

The question is, did we have enough open-mindedness or did we have our mind made up before walking into the room? I went to all three of those concerts; there were certain things I liked better than others. But I was there! And I was listening and absorbing. As an individual I have to select on the basis of my musical values. As one's intelligence and knowledge expands, one can deal with more things in a more intelligent way. My feeling is that *education* is the key to what we're talking about – and we've got to realise that we can't *instantly* make these things happen. But we've got to work at developing things that offer a person the means to grow.

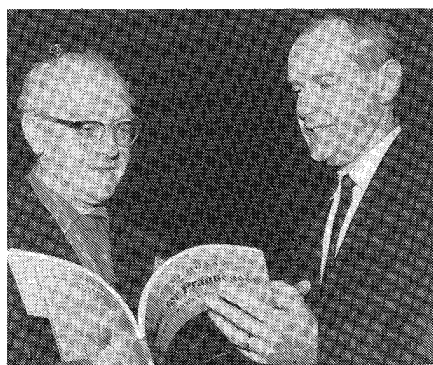
I follow your reasoning, but what seems to happen is that we don't balance our programmes within themselves with the varying shades necessary to relieve the ear and the intellect. On the other hand, it might be said that we are not playing for the general public.

At our Conferences, we might create a concert which basically deals with new music. That's not wrong. The Australian band played a Pops concert and that's what it was supposed to be. That also is not wrong. If you go to a concert with the

wrong expectation, then of course you will be disappointed.

Is there not a tendency when bringing a famous combination very expensively from a long distance, for them to justify the enterprise by 'showing off' their skills in a complete programme of 'difficult' music – for the listener as well as the executants?

Well, that may be the way they function at home. I don't think we would want a combination to come and do something that did not represent what they do at home. But are we going to say that the only things we are going to do to advance the art are the things that are popular with audiences? If that were so, we would not



Frank Battisti with composer Karel Husa (left) in 1970.

have a composer like Schoenberg. The composer is often ahead of the public. If we're involved in art, we must make a contribution to and have a responsibility for that art. To the art of the past – yes! But if our art is a living thing, then we have no choice but to participate in that art and to try to make a contribution to it. If I just use the things that have been given me and do not do something to advance them, then I'm a parasite. There has to be a balance between trying to be involved in what is going on today as well as honoring and appreciating the past.

It's like an experiment. If scientists in laboratories were not experimenting right now, some advance ten years down the road would not be there. We need innovators and creators.

You are on record as saying that avant-garde compositions, especially those with an aleatoric element, are good for getting student players involved in the process of composition in a way that is not possible with traditional music. That may be all very well in the practice room but what of an audience in a public performance? Do you not feel that not enough attention is given to educating audiences, who after all, are the ultimate consumers of the product, into accepting new and often strange music?

I have advocated the use of avant-garde music with aleatory episodes but in *short* pieces for use with youngsters. They must be short and they must be challenging for them but not break them. Judgement is called for. What I do is program such a short piece in the first half of a concert and do it again in the second, so that parents and others present will have a second chance to take it in. If I plan an intelligent program, that little five minutes of aleatory music is going to be seen as an *addition* to it. It all depends on where it is in the program and how it is presented; that's the key to it. Everything is legitimate. Everything has some use if one puts it in the right place *and* where the demands are not beyond the capacity of the receivers to deal with it.

Because our original wind band repertoire is of necessity modern, our programmes tend to be incomprehensible to the general public whereas a symphony concert would usually have a mixture of styles from many ages which people have come to accept. In this concept, a modern piece properly presented might stand a better chance of an open-minded hearing.

The orchestra contributes very little to what is going on in the present musical world. They can't do it because it's box office all the time. I can remember the time when the Boston Symphony Orchestra did not even advertise in the papers. The idea of selling T-shirts in the lobby of the Opera was unheard of. Now its salesmanship. We sell everything.

There's nothing wrong in having a Pops concert, a concert of the 1920s or a

contemporary music concert. The problem is that we bastardize concerts by trying to have them all in one concert. So, what does the band represent? It represents *everything* – therefore it represents *nothing*. Orchestras have pops concerts – serious concerts – contemporary music concerts. All I'm saying is: identify what it is you're doing – and do it. But you don't have to present a 'variety show of styles' in every concert.

Well, you know the success Simon Rattle is having with the Birmingham Symphony Orchestra. It may have something to do with his personal charisma but they are all subject to same box office pressures you mention. Yet it is recorded that his loyal audiences come just as well to hear Messiaen as they do for Mozart, apparently because if Rattle thinks it worth listening to, then that is good enough for them.

Maybe what we want at our Conferences is to have concerts which are examples of good *programming*. That would be good to do. But it would still call for open-mindedness from those who want only one kind of music performed. The question is that, if I'm going to use a jazz piece, I can't have it be a bad jazz piece. If I'm going to do an arrangement, it has to be a quality arrangement. Most of the stuff I hear played at pops concerts are glitzy, bad-taste arrangements. There are more of those per square inch than anything else we have.

Yesterday, we heard a scintillating performance of The Thievery Magpie Overture which put everyone in a good and receptive mood. If you were to follow that with, say, Soweran Spring, I think the more difficult listening would have a better chance of acceptance from an ordinary audience.

For the general listener, I would agree. But I go back to what I was saying. Whatever the piece, it has got to be of *quality*. No trash music! The majority of music published for school and community amateur bands is junk music. I say it all the time; I'm not afraid to say it. And I can prove it. The publishers themselves will tell you that they can't afford to publish quality music because it doesn't sell. And they don't dare to publish anything of more than four or five minutes in length. That's all a band concert is – 15 four-minute pieces. How can anyone be serious about us? An orchestral program is not like that. There is no reason why wind bands cannot perform pieces of 20 or 25 minutes. We can certainly do better than four or five minute pieces which are like popcorn. As pieces get longer, you immediately elevate the demands on the listener and it challenges an audience to make a commitment to staying the course.

I feel that not enough attention is given to the listener who may not be or have been a player. Don't we need to give more attention to music appreciation?

The job of music education any place in the world is to develop in a person skills, knowledge and the love and appreciation of music so that he or she can be an intelligent *consumer* of music. We have not done that. That's why we don't have audiences. When the music education community get serious about doing it, we will have audiences. We train people to play in groups. That doesn't necessarily



In the Rachmaninov Hall of the Moscow Conservatory, Frank Battisti addresses a press conference at the start of the 'Making Music Together' Festival, March 1991. (See WINDS, Autumn 1991, page 41).

mean they understand or appreciate anything. I know people who love to play in a group but won't go to a concert for anything. They love the *activity*; they do not love the *art* of music. They use music as an activity.

We do need to give more attention to music appreciation. And appreciation comes when we have equipped people with the knowledge, skills and experiences that allow them to develop insight which results in appreciation.

You appear to be saying that most of the thousands of young people right across the United States who are taught to play instruments are taught little musically beyond that?

That's right! The only way it's going to be changed is when we create a realisation in music educators that the issue is to get a kid to love *music* – not the *band*. The band is just the vehicle by which you study and fall in love with music. If we did that, a generation from now we would have these people in our audiences.

That makes my point that you just can't blame audiences for not appreciating that which is incomprehensible to them.

No. They're not equipped with the knowledge and skills that they need. We're talking about the art of listening and then understanding and arriving at appreciation. If we were, say, to walk into a physics lecture and hear a physicist lecturer talking on a subject we have little or no knowledge of, we probably would say, 'Forget it; let me out of here!'. But a group of physicists would be absorbed. It's *enlightenment*, it's *education*. That's what we should be about.

Is it not a case that a composer may expend much toil and tears over a long period on a composition in which much personal emotion and experience is poured. The conductor studies the score assiduously to get inside the music. With this guidance, the players rehearse carefully every little detail and nuance until they are as near to perfection as can be humanly achieved. Yet an audience, ill-equipped as we have seen, is expected to take it all in instantly at one hearing. A good recording puts the listener on a par with the executants, with repeat performances at will against hopefully informative notes. Is not the CD or cassette recording an excellent way to get the modern wind band literature known and appreciated?

Absolutely! What we have to do as a next step is to develop professional wind ensembles. I'm talking of the quality of player to be found in the London Symphony Orchestra – the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Players who are top professionals and who will make recordings on the first-line commercial labels. We need that desperately for the propagation of the literature. When someone sees a bill showing that an orchestra is to play the Beethoven 5th, the Tchaikovsky 6th – he or she *knows* these pieces having learnt them through phonograph records. So they decide to go to the concert and hear them live. But they get something advertising music by Husa, by Schuller – and its snowing outside – they don't know these people and so they stay at home. When people hear our literature and develop a liking for it, they'll come to our concerts. And recordings are the best way to do it.

Therefore I place great importance on the development of professional ensembles who would record for the big distributors. If there were professional wind ensemble concerts on the South Bank and recordings were available on Decca, Columbia or whatever – big labels – and if these were being played on the radio, that would make a hell of a difference.

What a lot we have to do!

These are big challenges – but we have to meet them.

Criticism is not always easy to take. But, as Frank Battisti points out in our August issue, *We Need Critics*.