

## EDITORIAL: WHAT'S THE POINT OF PRIZES?

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The winner of the 2016 Turner Prize, the UK's most widely publicised prize for visual artists, is Helen Martens; earlier in the year she also won the Hepworth Prize. On both occasions she announced that she would share her prize money with her fellow nominees, a generous yet provocative gesture. It's good to share, of course, but isn't the point of prizes that someone should win? And if the prizewinner is selected from a group of possible prizewinners who are themselves selected from the much larger pool of all those eligible why not share the prize with everyone?

Different art forms treat prizes differently; there are national variations too. The German new music scene abounds in prize opportunities, in Britain writers do much better than composers, for whom there are prizes but rarely any reward beyond glory and a free drink. In May the Royal Philharmonic Society will present awards for chamber and large-scale compositions, the British section of the ISCM has announced its six selected works for the World New Music Days and, as I write, the BASCA awards ceremony has just honoured more than a dozen composers, as well as bestowing Lifetime Achievement awards on Jennifer Walshe and Simon Bainbridge. Honour, but no cash – for big money it's the Grawemeyer Award which this year handed Andrew Norman \$100,000 for his orchestral *Play*.

That there is benefit from all this awarding is without doubt – prize-giving draws attention to the field in which the prized activity takes place, as well as recognising the achievements of the prize-worthy workers in that field. In the UK, fiction publishers are grateful for the 'Booker effect' which propels six novels to the front of bookshops for a month or two and usually drives up sales of the shortlisted authors, and the Turner Prize process always generates media coverage, although this tends to focus on controversy – bisected farm animals, elephant dung, light switches – rather than any sort of sophisticated aesthetic discussion.

But what would happen if there were no prizes? What would happen if the only significant award for artistic excellence was to be allowed to get past the gatekeepers – gallerists, publishers, concert promoters, broadcasters, film financiers – who decide whether or not work reaches the public? This heretical idea occurs to me quite often: sometimes, it must be said, when my own work has failed to win a prize, but more usually when I become involved in the selection system that eventually leads to one piece of music being judged superior to another.

Prizewinners are normally selected by panels of experts and the people selecting the experts who will make up the panels are careful

to make sure that they are broadly representative. Person A, who has a history of being interested in this sort of music, is balanced by Person B, who is interested in that sort of music, and so on. The consequence is that sometimes the prizewinning work, although excellent – how else would it have reached the panel in the first place? – represents the music that the fewest members of the panel dislike. I have seen this happen at first hand, seen one composer win because the other possible, and more strikingly original, contenders divided the jury; worse, I have been on a jury that awarded a really rather significant prize to a work which it was clear many of the jury had not heard. These are probably exceptions to the blamelessly objective selections made by most juries, but it is a truth universally acknowledged that a roomful of people in search of a decision will seek a compromise, and compromise and art should be kept apart.

A concert in the autumn inspired more anti-prize thoughts. Every year the vocal ensemble EXAUDI give an ‘Exposure’ concert in which they present a selection of recent and new music and this year the composers represented were Leo Chadburn, Andrew Hamilton, Jürg Frey, Naomi Pinnock, Claudia Molitor and Newton Armstrong. Although all composers used more or less the same resources – various combinations of eight singers, sometimes with playback too – the music could not have been more different. Some of it was elegant: Armstrong’s *partial objects* was a set of studies on steady and sliding tones, Pinnock’s *The Writings of Jakob Br.* an exploration into ways of drawing out phrases. Some of it was witty: Chadburn’s *Affix stamp here* set texts from a series of postcards, the consistency of format lending surprising significance to any deviation. Some of it was crazy: Hamilton’s *Proclamation of the Republic* was a wildly difficult recreation of the ‘confusion and repetition of Patrick Pearse’s reading of the text during the 1916 Easter Uprising in Dublin’.

Frey’s *Shadow and Echo and Jade* set me thinking about the space in which the 2016 ‘Exposure’ took place, the LSO St Luke’s Centre: the main Jerwood Hall is a converted church and I began to hear Frey’s music as another temporary intervention in the fabric of the building, like the steel roof trusses, the spiral staircases and balconies, the suspended lighting rig, the interior glazing to shut out the noise of Old Street, the carefully patched brickwork, even us, the listeners. But above all, I was struck both by the impossibility of making comparisons between these six pieces and by the fact that the decision to put them together had been taken by one person, EXAUDI’s director James Weeks. What made the concert so exciting was this diversity and the authority of the performances which Weeks directed; diversity and authority, the two qualities that the reductive, consensual processes of prize-awarding can never achieve.

One more thought on the unsuitability of prizes as a means of judging art: the importance of some art is just hard to understand – too complicated and it seems wilful, too simple and it seems to lack ambition. On 25 November 2016 the pianist Philip Thomas (@philip\_thomas\_1) tweeted, ‘Pauline Oliveros. What a loss. I think that we were only just catching on’. Across her long career Oliveros had won prizes but mostly they were awards for being Pauline Oliveros, for advocating a shift of attention away from the ‘what’ and ‘why’ of listening and towards the ‘how’. Her advocacy was so powerful that it was easy to forget that the ‘what’ of her own work offered the richest reward to the ‘how’ of deep listening; her music sounded so right that it was perhaps too easy to forget how extraordinary it was. Now that she is gone it really is time to catch on.

Observant readers will notice a new name on the *TEMPO* masthead. When Juliet Fraser stepped down from the role earlier in 2016 the plan was that her successor would be Kate Molleson, but in the end that proved not to be possible. Instead I am delighted to welcome Heather Roche as the new Reviews Editor. Heather enjoys an international career as a clarinettist, she is a founder member of the ensemble hand werk, and she is the creator of a widely read blog – <https://heatherroche.net/>. She will bring fresh perspectives to *TEMPO* and I am sure her influence will become apparent in the next issue, the first for which she and I will assume co-editorial responsibility.