

Touchy

Susan Parenti

First performed at Allen Hall, University of Illinois, 1981, by Paul Musial, Donna Stowe, Mary Penne, Clyde Walker.

Performance Context of *Touchy*

Touchy is a little play to be performed on a new music concert.

This means that in order to perform *Touchy*, you need, first, to listen to new music; second, to meet new music composers and musicians; and third, to create with them a new music concert (on which you'll perform *Touchy*).

Questions:

What am I calling new music?

New music results when a composer attempts to contribute something to music, which hasn't yet been a part of music—to add something to what we know of music.

With an allergy to the commercialization of the word “new”, Herbert Brün uses the term “contributive music” rather than “new music”. “Contributive music” has been locked out by commercial radio stations and recording companies, so it's not so easy to find. However, there are some examples of compositions in your public library. We recommend compositions by the composers Pamela Z, Iannis Xenakis, Anton Webern, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Igor Stravinsky, Ruth Crawford Seeger, Arnold Schönberg, Roger Reynolds, Pauline Oliveros, Charles Ives, Kenneth Gaburo, John Cage, Anthony Braxton, Pierre Boulez, Alban Berg—to name a few that most probably will be in town libraries.

Where do you meet living composers and players of new music?

You find them wherever people have thought about “contributing something to what music is”—which means wherever people study what music has been in order to create what hasn't been there yet. In my happy head, I imagine that you'd locate a composition-division in the music department of a local university, walk around, make friends with student composers, listen to music together. Or get in contact with the American Composers Forum, which has been creating social contexts for composers.

Lastly, how do you work with these composers to create a new music concert?

Composers are used to “composing pieces”; they can be asked to “compose the concert”: make links and relations between pieces on the program. Performing *Touchy* after a piece of music is one such link.

What I’m asking here may seem like a lot. “What, you’re asking me to undergo a life-style change—make new friends, hang around new places, learn about new musics, organize a concert—just in order to perform a short little theater quartet?” Yup, that’s right. New music has that effect on people—people who listen to new music have to make a decision about what is and is not worth their time and attention. New music requires change.

Besides, don’t you want to make new friends? Especially with a group which threatens to become extinct? In the present radically commercial environment, composers suffer from “failure to thrive”—and they (we) can use all the friends we can get.

I’ve added “experimental music composers” to the lists of endangered species. Two dinosaurs, a few years before the species became extinct:

DINOSAUR 1: Gee, it’s Saturday night and I’d love to play some Schönberg in the company of a few friends. Why don’t we invite over Dotty and Lou?

DINOSAUR 2: No way. They’re dead.

DINOSAUR 1: Oh yeah, that’s right. What about Deb?

DINOSAUR 2: Croaked last month.

DINOSAUR 1: Jeez. Well—Rick and Andy?

DINOSAUR 2: Migrated to the West Coast; same with Arun and Lori, and Linda Antas.

DINOSAUR 1: How about Luke?—he used to play experimental ensemble music.

DINOSAUR 2: Switched to library science.

DINOSAUR 1: Abigail and Sofie?

DINOSAUR 2: Power company turned off their heat 'cause they couldn't pay the bills. Froze to death.

DINOSAUR 1: Jeez. That leaves—

DINOSAUR 2: You and me.

Performers' Workshop Ensemble

Touchy was written as a part of the “investigations” we were making in the Performers' Workshop Ensemble. We described the PWE in this way:

“We are a troupe of musicians and actors who have been working with each other since 1978. In order to establish connections between art and society, we take as a point of departure the desirability but insufficiency of making concerts. Therefore we create not only compositions and concerts, but also projects that question the status quo of art in society.”

—from the Beloved Booklet

History

In the early 1980s a group of us in Urbana, Illinois (calling ourselves the Performers' Workshop Ensemble), carefully constructed and rehearsed experimental music pieces. Indeed, this group had grown out of weekly “performers' workshops” at the U of I, instigated by Herbert Brün, where all aspects of performance—from the “trivial” to the “important”—were discussed and played with.

We decided to take our good news (new music) to people in Paxton, Galesburg, Farmer City, Illinois. From the stage, with glowing faces, we performed what we had worked on so gleefully. But the audience didn't share our glee. From our perspective, they didn't understand that we were giving them something wonderful; from their perspective, we didn't understand that we were giving something that was unpleasurable, demanding, a test, made them feel stupid, uneducated, put upon.

Listening to what the audience had to say, from their side of the stage, I couldn't hear anything about what we actually had done, from our side of the stage. And,

indeed, hearing our concert described in their language, I didn't want what we had done, either. How dare we drive so far just to make people feel stupid, uncomfortable, bored, put upon?

In that year, 1981, of performing in small towns in Illinois, it was a year to either: (1) Hate the audience, decide they were stupid, persist in writing experimental music but for educated audiences; (2) Hate the audience, decide they were stupid, but no longer write experimental music and instead present something much simpler, TV-like, familiar; or (3) Invent another possibility.

We decided on #3, since we both liked our audiences (indeed, many of them were friends, lovers, relatives, neighbors, co-workers, students) and liked writing experimental propositions in sound.

So we decided we needed not only to compose pieces, we needed also to compose their context—particularly, to compose language around the music. The language that audiences have inherited makes the registration of their musical experiences a hostile one. What had to be changed was not the audience nor the music, but the language.

This 1981 experience opened a floodgate of ideas and projects—investigations—in what we called “Experiments in Concert Format”. The imperative behind these experiments: in addition to composing music pieces, compose contexts in which the pieces will be seen as a contribution.

Touchy is an early example of such an attempt.

Form of *Touchy*

I thought of the four actors as a quartet, and played with combinations of four: 2 + 2 (duo plus duo), 3 + 1 (trio versus solo), 4 (ensemble tutti), etc.

It may be fun to rehearse the piece by making use of the changes in “ensemble combinations”. Certainly, the history of “tutti” ensemble playing is different from that of “solo versus trio”—differences manifested in tempo, dynamics, timbre, silences, largeness or smallness of gesture.

Touchy in eight parts, for four voices
version for 1990 audiences

MARK

MARY

LAURA

BILL

As mentioned in the Preface, Touchy is to be performed on a new music concert, directly preceded by a new music piece. MARY's reference to the piece in Part I can name the actual title and instrumentation. The performance set-up of Touchy is to give the impression that the Touchy actors are applauding, and responding to whatever actual piece was played.

PART 1: DUO VERSUS DUO

Play begins with applause in black; lights up on applauding actors seated in a row as though attending a concert. LAURA & BILL applaud in a Perfunctory way, MARK & MARY loudly. They finish applauding as lights come up. LAURA & BILL go from looking out (at imaginary musicians) down to their pages (their imaginary concert programs). MARK makes conducting movements and sings quietly "da dah, da dah, da dah, da dah!" MARY watches him with affectionate concern. MARK repeats this, then says:

MARK: *(With frustration, quietly)* Oh they didn't play the rhythm right!

MARY: Really? Oh well, I didn't notice, it sounded good to me!

MARK: No! *(Shakes his head, as though to himself)* Da dah, da dah, da dah
(He sings and conducts throughout the following dialog, and MARY nods sympathetically to the rhythm)

LAURA: Hmmm. Gee, I'm lost. *(Pause 3" to look carefully at program)*
Honey, where are we in the program?

BILL: Ahhhhhh (*Pause 3"*, to study his page) Good question.

LAURA: Well, what was the piece they just finished playing?

At this, which MARK and MARY have overheard, both MARK and MARY stop previous activities and turn heads discreetly towards LAURA and BILL.

BILL: (*Humorously, shaking his head*) Another question that baffles the mind. I don't know!

Pause 3". In this time, MARY waits, then leans somewhat timidly towards LAURA and BILL, and says:

MARY: It was called *Voices* for trumpet and trombone. (*With slight laugh*) He wrote it! (*Indicates MARK*)

LAURA: (*To MARK*) YOU wrote it? ,

MARK: (*Nods, with a slight laugh. He's both pleased and embarrassed*) Yes.

LAURA: Gee, Bill, we've got the composer sitting right next to us!

BILL: (*He considers himself a person with a good sense of humor; whistles jokingly*) Glad I didn't say anything bad about it!

LAURA: (*Quickly, mock disapproval—she thinks he's a card, and likes him*) Bill!

BILL: Just joking. Seriously, it was interesting!

MARK: Thank you very much.

Pause 3".

PART 2: SOLO VERSUS DUO

BILL: (*Male*) Well, now that we've got a real live composer sitting right next to us—what do you call that type of music?

MARK: I'd like to call it *new music*... and since it's new, there's no "type" for it, yet.

LAURA: (*Female*) Well, but it's classical, sort of, right?

MARK: No, it's new music.

LAURA: Yeah, OK, but what I mean is, it isn't pop or jazz, so—well, what would you—

BILL: What I think she's getting at, well as I see it, my girlfriend and I are part of a vast, unschooled audience, who sit in a concert hall (*Gesture*) feeling like—caterpillars in the midst of a grape stomping festival

LAURA: Bill!

BILL: —like fish in the middle of cornfield: we float, we drift, we try to swim, we flash our fins—but we end up drowned, in a puddle of mud. In other words, what I mean is—the music that we—intuitively—find boring, or noisy, we later are told was great stuff! And then, the music we find beautiful, that sends chills down our spine—and what better measure of greatness than chills down your spine—we're told is “trite”. Trite! (*He appeals to the others with this word*)

LAURA: Bill—

BILL: Our basic sensibilities get so confused that we've gotta wait till the morning's newspaper in order to find out what it was we heard the night before!
(*Confidently*) The problem is, I feel, (*he gestures to himself*) is that the human race is in danger (*simultaneously with LAURA*) of losing its basic categories. In—

LAURA: (*simultaneously with BILL*) of losing its basic categories. (*To MARK and MARY*) I've heard this before

BILL: But that's a terrible thing, honey. In short, all we want to know is, is it lean meats, bread products, dairy or—

LAURA: (*Anticipates BILL*) vegetables.

BILL: —vegetables? Not to pussyfoot around, was your piece classical, pop, jazz—or whatever?

During BILL's speech, MARK leans forward in order to better observe BILL's performance. He is expressionless. He then puts his left elbow on his knee, and steadily, expressionlessly watches as BILL finishes his speech. MARY also watches BILL, but less showily than MARK: she keeps her face turned towards BILL, with a moderate expression of amazement mixed with horror.

MARK: (*Pause 3" before replying; short*) None of the above. The piece wants to be heard as new music, and I want it talked about that way. New music.

MARY: (*Sotto voce*) Mark!

LAURA: (*Offended*) Well, excuse us, we're not in the arts, that term doesn't mean much to us, alright?

MARK: Well, try to make it mean something to you.

MARY: (*Sotto voce*) Mark, c'mon.

BILL: (*Still jovial*) Well, new can mean just about anything

MARK: You're not trying!

MARY: (*Sotto voce*) Mark, that's not nice!

LAURA: (*Belligerent*) Dress styles are called "new", lipsticks are called "new"—

MARK: Still not trying!

MARY: (*A little louder*) Mark, cut it out!

LAURA: (*Belligerent*)—so new doesn't mean anything. in particular.

MARK: Well, make it mean something "in particular"!

MARY: (*Heated whisper*) Mark, stop it. You could at least *explain* what you're talking about!

MARK: I am explaining. I'm trying to—

MARY: But they don't understand what you're talking about, and it doesn't help to get angry.

LAURA: (*Bitterly*) Right, we're such ignoramuses, we don't understand anything.

MARY: (*Sincerely addressing LAURA and BILL*) No, you're not at all. It's just that he gets so wound up in his jargon, I'm his friend, (*Little laugh*) I should know.

PART 3: SOLO VERSUS DUO

MARY: (*Sincerely venturing forward*) I guess what I would say about his music is that . . . it's in the serious vein.

LAURA: (*Complainingly, enters quickly*) Well, right, that's what I meant by classical!

MARY: Right, and well . . .

MARK: (*Flatly*) Mary, what are you doing?

MARY: (*To MARK*) Just wait a minute, alright? (*To LAURA and BILL*) And, well, wait—have you ever heard this weird type of music they sometimes play on FM?

MARK: Mary, what are you—

MARY: (*To MARK*) Just wait! (*To LAURA and BILL*) Well, maybe “weird” isn't the right word,—I mean, the kind without a melody or anything?

BILL: (*Jokingly*) Sounds like “whatever”.

MARY: (*Enthusiastically, now coming to her conclusion*) Right, if you just put it all together, that the music is (*Slow down, as in a list*) classical, or in the serious vein, but kind of weird, though that's not very accurate—

MARK: Mary what—

MARY: (*Flustered, to MARK*) I'm just trying to explain; maybe I'm not doing it right, but—

LAURA: (*To MARK*) Let her finish, alright?

MARY: Yeah, well, and—oh now I've lost my train of thought—(*Pause 3"*) Oh yeah—well, if you just put it all together, that it's (*Slowly*) classical or in the serious vein—

MARK: (*Groaningly*) Ohhhh—

MARY: (*Ignoring him, but very flustered*)—in the serious vein, and kind of weird (*She says this rebelliously*), and if you add on to all of that that it's also avant-garde—

MARK: Mary!

MARY: (*Mixture of timidity and rebellion*) Let me finish! (*Clicks tongue*) Tch. (*Back to LAURA and BILL*) Well, there you have it.

MARK: (*Glumly*) Jello.

MARY: (*Offended, furious*) Oh, Mark! (*Turns defiantly to LAURA and BILL*) Well, do you get what I mean, anyway?

LAURA: (*Still belligerent*) Yeah, well now I understand!

BILL: Me too, thanks!

MARY: (*Confidentially to LAURA and BILL*) Well, he's just so involved in it, that he can't explain about it sometimes. (*Somewhat pleadingly to MARK*) Well, you know you do get so intense about it, but that's alright, it's just when you get so rude—

PART 4: SOLO VERSUS CHORUS

MARK: (*Whispering*) I wasn't rude, and you don't know what you're talking about at all.

MARY: (*Whispering*) I do, too.

MARK: No you don't.

MARY: (*Louder whisper*) Yes I do!

MARK: (*Louder whisper*) No you don't.

Pause 3”.

MARY: I’ve listened to you enough—

BILL begins whistling a tune, as though to tactfully cover up the “embarrassing” argument between MARK and MARY. LAURA should look “tactfully” at the ceiling, though allowing herself a look at the arguing pair once in a while. When MARK starts imitating MARY loudly, BILL should whistle even louder, and stop when MARY says “Shhh”.

MARK: No.

MARY: —And I said the same thing as you did—

MARK: Uh uh.

MARY: –But just in different words—

MARK: I do not go around saying (*loudly, in a sarcastic mock-female voice, very high*) “Well, it’s this kind of weird music they sometimes play on FM, though it’s not rock or jazz but it is in the classified vein, except that it’s avant-garde”!

MARY: Shhh. (*Softly*) That’s not nice.

PART 5: TRIO VERSUS SOLO

LAURA: (*Clears throat “tactfully”*) Is it safe? (*Giggle*) Ahh, well, I just want to say that I really appreciate that you (*indicates MARY*) at least tried to, communicate. I guess we’re really stupid or something but I got the feeling that he was writing us off!

MARY: Oh well, he just gets so uncommunicative and asocial; I guess artists—

BILL: The funny thing is, I always thought that artists are supposed to be the experts at communicating!

LAURA: Yeah!

BILL: That's their trade! If, as I said before, the audience is just a vast, unschooled—

MARK: (*Bursts out*) What's the value of communication if it prevents me from saying anything?

2" *pause.*

LAURA: Nobody stopped you from talking fella! But you just said a bunch of things no one understood!

BILL: It's a funny thing that your girlfriend here is the one who's better at communicating—

PART 6: SOLO VERSUS SOLO

MARY: Ah, whoa, just a sec. (*Laughs*) I said I was his friend, I didn't say I was his girlfriend, OK?

BILL: (*Pause to take this in*) Oh, "just friends". Sorry, no insult intended!

MARY: No, no, wait: we're not "just friends". I'm his friend, OK?

BILL: Oh. (*Another pause*) Well, big deal, his girlfriend, his friend . . .

MARY: It *is* a big deal. To some people, it is a big deal whether they say they be-friend a person, or "girlfriend" a person . . . it is

BILL: Oh, c'mon, you do the same things whether you're his girlfriend or be-friend, not to get crude or anything, but—

MARY: Ah, I think you're missing the distinction, and it's a point I'm really sensitive about

BILL: Well, what is the point?

PART 7: DUO VERSUS SOLO

MARK: She just told you: there's a big difference whether you say "girlfriend" or "friend", it affects the way a person acts, and she's real sensitive about this—

BILL: Big difference, god! If you and your old lady want to make a big deal—

MARY: I AM NOT HIS OLD LADY! (*To MARK*) Mark—

MARK: That's not very funny.

BILL: I was just kidding!

MARY: Well, it isn't funny. (*Undertone*) Macho!

BILL: Don't you have a sense of humor? (*Undertone, to LAURA*) Jesus!

PART 8: SOLO VERSUS SOLO

LAURA: (*To BILL*) Wait a minute, honey, let me say something. (*To MARY and MARK*) I'm a female, too, and one of the supposedly "oppressed" people, or whatever. I think that you're defeating your own purpose. The idea is to act in a decent human way towards other people. But by splitting hairs, or getting a chip on your shoulder and refusing to talk except in the very exact terms you want, you end up turning off the very people you're trying to talk to! You're defeating your own purpose!

MARY: I'm not defeating my purpose! All I want—

MARK: No, you are! Look, I don't care when Bill calls me his "chick".

MARY: Oh, I don't believe this—

LAURA: I don't! 'Cause I know what he feels for me, and it doesn't matter what terms he uses for it. And it doesn't even bother me when my boss calls me his "honey bunny" in the office—I mean, maybe it's a little insulting, but he's just trying to communicate affection, and that's what really matters right?

MARY: (*To MARK*) Do you believe this?

LAURA: (*Earnestly*) Don't you understand, can't you see that when everyone makes such a fuss with language, it just turns people off?

Black out.

END