

Performers as Commissioners of New Music in the Twentieth Century: Preconditions, Self-Conceptions, Impacts

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For centuries, the act of sponsoring art had been performed by the socioeconomic and political elites, but in the sphere of classical music (in the broadest sense), the twentieth century witnessed a new phenomenon: performers who commission and finance composers to write for them and who therefore often generate entire new repertoires for their instruments. This project addresses questions of the underlying backgrounds and individual motivations, the artistic exchange between the collaborative partners, and the afterlife of the musical result. In the center will be chosen artists, who essentially shaped their instruments' repertoire and aesthetics by granting commissions: Paul Wittgenstein (1887–1961) established left-handed piano playing in a completely new dimension after the loss of his right arm in World War I; Marian Anderson (1897–1993) stimulated a flourishing production of spiritual songs for her voice and the classical concert setting; Sylvia Marlowe (1908–1981) and Antoinette Vischer (1909–1973) moved composers to write for the harpsichord as a modern instrument; “King of Swing” Benny Goodman (1909–1986) initiated an important section of twentieth-century solo repertoire for the clarinet alongside his efforts to consolidate himself as a classical performer.

Drawing on a broad basis of primary sources (correspondence, contracts, manuscript and printed sheet music, audio recordings, press reports etc.) and taking up approaches from musicology, history, and sociology for their interpretation, three main levels will be examined: 1) preconditions – determining the cultural, social, and economic framework of performers granting commissions; 2) self-conceptions of the involved individuals – which might be reflected by role allocations, contractual terms, and feelings about ownership; 3) impacts – tracking the compositions' relevance and reception history in the careers of the particular performers as well as in the general repertoire. Presenting a foundational systematic elaboration of performers taking a proactive role in the formation of a new repertoire – as the ones who not only distribute but instigate and finance it – this work enhances a differentiated understanding of their agencies within the power structures of art production and of their impact on the history of classical music.