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In 2011, the *Gaudeamus* music festival was moved from Amsterdam to Utrecht, where, as a festival of festivals, it became independent again, after many years of operating under the auspices of the Muziek Centrum Nederland. It is a composers' competition, established in 1947 as a local event and turned into an international festival in 1959. Past laureates of the *Gaudeamus* award include composers such as Louis Andriessen, Pauline Oliveros, Vinko Globokar, as well as Serbian composer Marko Nikodijević, who won this prestigious award in 2010.

The concept of the competition itself is unique and includes competing between five composers, who are required to submit an orchestral, vocal, and chamber work each – specially written for the festival's residential ensemble. The festival itself is preceded by the so-called Gaudeamus Music Week (*Gaudeamus Muziekweek*). During those seven days, the composers have an opportunity to work with the ensembles, prepare their works, and participate in workshops, as well as present their poetic and aesthetic views to the jury in the form of a round-table. Last year, the jury

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comprised three composers: Oscar Bianchi, the *Gaudeamus* laureate of 2005, Belgian composer Wim Hendrickx, and Vanessa Lann, an American composer based in the Netherlands. The 2014 nominees were Benjamin Scheuer from Germany, Marina Poleukhina from Russia, Hikari Kiyama from Japan, Anna Korsun from Ukraine, and Francisco Castillo Trigueros from Mexico. The nominees had at their disposal the festival's residential ensemble, the *Looptail*, *Asco|Schönberg* orchestra, and the vocal group *Silbersee*.

The German composer Benjamin Scheuer, a former student of Wolfgang Rihm, presented the following works: *Absurde Apparate* (2013) for children's toys, *Kaleidoscope* (2013) for four vocal soloists, and *Überzeichnungen* (2014) for chamber ensemble and tape. His poetics rest upon re-examining the function and status of humour in music. To that end, he uses seemingly banal sound structures in order to create a specific, grotesque, and slightly "out of joint" musical world. A world that seems like a surreal circus, where things are unclear and bordering on the funny and the tragic. In that sense, he often explores the sonic potentials of children's toys, combining them with standard instruments. In his works, the sound impression they generate takes precedence over form, which mostly rests on a collage principle, with no deeper internal cohesion. Although communicative, his pieces mostly remain on the level of unfinished experiments, bringing little in the way of innovation and creativity.

A similar assessment applies to compositions by Marina Poleukhina. She presented the following works: *And Add to the Neon Elk a Pinch of Tarragon* (2012), *For Five Guitars* (2013), and *In Its Own Tempo*

(2014). These are quite similar works, based on principles of controlled or even *notated* improvisation. They follow a cyclical logic of alternating between vacuous and dense sonic structures, which secures a dynamic flow. The result is monotonous music of a neo-avant-garde profile, right on the border of dilettantism. The arbitrary production of sounds on various instruments, with nothing in the way of more meaningful structuring, is the main feature of Poleukhina's rather pale work in composition.

Still, among the nominees, two composers stood out, with an awareness of the need to conceptualize their artistic expression. These were the Mexican composer Francisco Trigueros and his Japanese colleague Hikari Kiyama. Trigueros's music features a strongly poetic character and a peculiar beauty of a classical type. Devoting much attention to compositional skill, this composer stood out from his fellow nominees, who mostly focused on experimentation as their often only poetic idea. At the competition, we had the opportunity to hear the following works by Trigueros: *Sur les debris* (2013), *Resti* (2014), and *Nealika* (2010). They testify to the composer's divergent interests, ranging from the poetry of Arthur Rimbaud to exploring the tradition of Mexico's indigenous population (in *Nealika*). However, his creative associations do not constitute dominant elements in his music that are meant to help one understand its musical messages, but instead subtly construct an inter-textual web of meanings, which may undergo divergent interpretations.

Unlike Trigueros, who remains faithful to the traditional view of composition, Hikari Kiyama strives to set new standards of writing and performing. With extremely

quick and loud pieces (*Sax Quartet*, *Myojin*, ???),¹ Kiyama in fact tests his performers' physical abilities. A paradigmatic example of his aesthetic or, rather, manner, is *3 Shells*, a piece for a *three-armed* pianist. One may perform the piece only if using a leg as well! Therefore, this is absurd but also bold music, which may be viewed as a sort of Ravelian *tour de force*.

Unlike Trigueros and Kiyama and similarly to the other two 2014 *Gaudeamus Award* nominees discussed above, the Ukrainian composer Anna Korsun likewise presented weak works,² with no firm poetic grounding or developed musical imagination. Nevertheless, her mostly modernist orientation and neo-avant-garde way of thinking somehow managed to find their way to the jury, who produced a rather positive assessment of her work. Moreover, and quite disappointingly, Korsun won the *Gaudeamus Award* itself. In fact, this shook the jury's credibility and unfairly treated much better composers, such as Trigueros and Kiyama. It was an unexpected decision, since Korsun, who for the most part toyed with instrumental timbres and deconstruction of sonic material, showed that she is neither a mature author nor that she possesses compositional skill or lucidity.

In that sense, one may conclude that this was an almost controversial decision by the three-member jury. If their aim is to retain the status of their prestigious event in future, painstakingly built for many years, the organizers of the *Gaudeamus* competition will have to devote special attention to selecting their juries and assessing their competence.

¹ All three works were composed in 2013.

² *Vocerumori* (2012), *Plexus* (2014), and *Wehmut* (2011).