

An open letter to Sound and Music and Arts Council England

27 March 2012

In its business plan of 2008, formulated after several years of detailed planning and approved by the Arts Council, the newly created body Sound and Music made it clear that it would both embrace and enhance the functions of the organisations which had been merged in order to form it: the Society for the Promotion of New Music, the British Music Information Centre, Sonic Arts Network, and the Contemporary Music Network. Instead, within a remarkably short time, it abandoned virtually all of the long-established and constructive activities of its constituent parts, largely in favour of a bland and unfocused endorsement of 'sound art' and the promotion of relatively fringe activities which had little or no connection with the mainstream. These are far from being areas undeserving of support, but Sound and Music had absolutely no remit to change direction in this way.

Rather than act on behalf of composers and the many musicians who work in the field of new music, it sought to become a 'producer' and to lead instead of serve its community. Having dismantled the previous organisations and disenfranchised their extensive membership, Sound and Music went on to alienate virtually the entire contemporary music sector: a recent wide-ranging survey conducted for the Holst Foundation (*Provision for New Music*, bit.ly/jOv7MW) could find no one with a good word to say on its behalf. What is particularly disturbing is the disappearance of the support for young and unestablished composers (and the musicians working with them) which the founder organisations had successfully provided over many years. Equally distressing is the abandonment of any form of Music Information Centre in England, resulting in a significant loss of international status for British music.

In spite of recent severe cuts to its public funding and the resignation of members of both the executive and board last year, Sound and Music's current 'New Direction' document shows absolutely no sign of recognition of or apology for the extent of its failure to live up to its original plans; no indication that it has consulted at all with the new music community it presumes to represent; no reduction in its bloated corporate agenda; nor any desire to take risks. Instead it has, in self-regarding fashion, promised more of the same; and has pledged to continue promoting 'Electronic and Improvised; Noise and Art Rock; Notated and Modern Composition; Sonic Art; Multimedia and Cross Art Form; Jazz, World and Folk; and Alternative Rock & Dance': areas of music which have many virtues but are for the most part entirely different from those for which Sound and Music was created.

The undersigned, the majority of whom are actively engaged with 'Notated and Modern Composition', deplore the current state of affairs, and call for the reinstatement of the core functions of the founder organisations without delay. The recommendations of the Holst Foundation report offer many practical suggestions for the appropriate support of new music in the years ahead.

Signed:

Nicola LeFanu, Colin Matthews and over 250 signatories,

headed by Sir Harrison Birtwistle and Sir Peter Maxwell Davies and including Julian Anderson, George Benjamin, Sir Richard Rodney Bennett, Martyn Brabbins, Michael Finnissy, Anthony Gilbert, Steven Isserlis, Oliver Knussen, Paul Mealar, Thea Musgrave, and Judith Weir.

A full list of signatories is attached.