

Titles with a Mission?

Increasingly, instrumental musical works are appearing with titles that suggest they embody social issues. Think of pieces inspired by climate change, biodiversity loss, or social inequality. But how meaningful is this, really? Can such complex and abstract themes truly be made audible in music?

If we look back through music history, it is only relatively recently that composers began trying to imbue their works with meaning through titles. During the Baroque period and earlier, instrumental music generally referred to dance forms or structural principles rather than ideas or emotions—let alone social issues. Secular and sacred songs, with their lyrics and titles, were an exception. It was not until Impressionism at the beginning of the twentieth century (and occasionally before that) that composers started using titles that evoked atmosphere or imagery, such as Debussy's *La Mer* or Smetana's *The Moldau*, where it is conceivable that the music may evoke certain visual or emotional associations. Other examples include the symphonic poems of Arnold Bax and Jean Sibelius. Later, this tendency was undoubtedly reinforced by the rise of feature film and documentary music, in which music became directly associated with meaning or emotion.

Take, for example, a flower-filled garden. A garden itself cannot truly be translated into sound, although one can evoke associations such as tranquility or colour. A bird in flight, with its movements, may inspire a musical gesture, just as a poem might. And yes, one can dedicate a piece to a person or an idea—but that does not literally depict them; at most, it evokes an atmosphere. The rest is interpretation—subjective and always dependent on the listener.

A thought experiment: suppose I were to give the second movement of Frank Martin's *Polyptique* for violin and orchestra the title *Cry of Mother Earth*. Would the music then be perceived differently? Would it acquire a different meaning? Would listeners suddenly think of ecological catastrophe? Or would it remain simply a beautiful second movement of a magnificent work?

Again, the question arises: can we truly *hear* titles such as *Sea-Level Rise*, *Biodiversity*, *Gender Awareness*, or similar concepts? Or are such titles merely a means of attracting attention?

What also intrigues me is who this supposedly "critical" music is actually intended for. Most people are already reasonably well informed, socially engaged—or one would hope so—and aware of the troubling developments around us. And if, by chance, a dictator or polluter happens to be sitting in the audience, it is very unlikely that he or she will change policy or undergo a moral awakening after hearing a symphonic protest. The real target audience therefore does not seem to be such individuals—unless the primary purpose is to broadcast a message, to draw attention as mentioned earlier, rather than to create a musical experience.

The fact that music (especially music with text) expresses social engagement is, of course, nothing new. This was already happening centuries ago. One need only think of the protest

songs of the 1960s. Today, such works primarily reflect the spirit of their time. The question remains: have they truly changed anything? Perhaps a little, perhaps not. Their impact is difficult to measure.

What endures, however, is the power of beauty itself. By creating music that moves people, one may hopefully contribute to a greater awareness—not through slogans, but through sound.

Finally, as a composer, one cannot constantly carry the weight of the world's problems while writing. A title laden with urgency can become more of a constraint than a source of inspiration. Some of my own earlier titles may contradict this argument, but increasingly I find myself believing in the quiet power of musical beauty rather than in the loud call of socially engaged, mission-driven titles.

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