



Fast food of tunes

Are we coping with the information overload these days? Guy Noble wonders whether too much, too often is distracting our composers

As one looks through the history of music composition, an interesting fact emerges. The old composers moved fast. Tchaikovsky wrote most of the music for the ballet *The Sleeping Beauty* in about three weeks, Mozart famously wrote his last three symphonies in six weeks and Bach knocked off a new cantata every 15 minutes.

What was it in the water of the 17th and 18th centuries that enabled these composers to work at such amazing compositional speeds? After much research I have come to a startling conclusion – the lack of telephones.

Before the invention of the long range speaking device there was a blissful peace across the land, interrupted only by the sound of busy quills scratching on manuscript. Mozart didn't need to take the call from Pakistan trying to update his mobile plan, Bach didn't have to take out his credit card and donate to worthy charities and poor old Beethoven wouldn't have heard it even if it had rung. Tchaikovsky was lucky, he just scraped through *The Sleeping Beauty* as the telephone was being invented, but every composer after him has had to down tools and take a call, thereby slowing the pace of global composition. A phone ringing is a perfect excuse to put off for another moment the act of writing music, which like any sort of creation is difficult and takes an awful lot of thought and energy. You can just imagine God on the Third Day taking a call from an old friend and completely forgetting to finish Norway.

Even talking about a telephone these days is so old hat: Twitter, Facetube and Yospace have created a new generation of social network devices otherwise known as Wonderful Ways To Waste Time. Indeed the only good thing about these networks is that it confirms that everyone else's life is as boring as yours. "Had a cup of coffee."

"Lost sock in washing machine."

"I like jam."

Riveting stuff. I have yet to read: "Cured cancer this morning then went to shops".



IN THE GOOD OLD PRE-DIGITAL ERA WHEN YOU MISSED A PROGRAM, YOU MISSED IT. NOW SOME NIGHTS I'M UP TILL DAWN OVER A HOT MP3 PLAYER TRYING TO GET THROUGH A BACKLOG OF PODCASTS.

So much information everywhere and so little of it in people's heads: trillions of megabytes flying about us in an unseen wireless world; a jumble of mobile calls, photos and documents. The other morning I woke up and found someone's spreadsheet stuck to my left cheek.

Rather than modern communication making you feel connected, it actually encourages the sense that you are constantly missing out on something. Radio National has obviously told all its presenters to spruik the station website and let everyone know that if they miss a program they can always download it later. Whilst this is a wonderful way to catch up on an excellent Background Briefing or LNL during your daily walk, (by

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the way, does anyone else think that Philip Adams is slowly morphing into a baritone Dame Edna?) there aren't enough hours in the day to keep up with this deluge of information.

In the good old pre-digital era when you missed a program, you missed it. Now some nights I'm up till dawn over a hot mp3 player trying to get through a backlog of podcasts, emailing all the programs with how I feel about what has been discussed, and then checking in with the website of the shampoo I use. (Why anyone needs to have a relationship with a shampoo company is beyond me, but now that I have a user name and password I'm hooked.) I would love to write more on this issue, but the phone is ringing...