

'A composer's half-century'

Nicola LeFanu reflects on some of the changes in music - in its practice and its reception - during the fifty years of her career in Britain.

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My half-century has seen some great changes for composers, performers and listeners. In my life-time, 78s became LPs, then came cassettes, mini discs, compact discs and today, audio files are virtual, streamed direct to our ears. When I was a child, people referred to 'serious music' and 'light music'. Now, media listings of events have a heading 'Music' – a long list of events; then there is another heading – 'Classical' - a shorter list. Is 'Classical' not music? Even this heading gets broken down in some contexts, into further pigeonholes such as sound art, electronic music, not to mention jazz, folk, early music and world music – though most of us don't think in terms of pigeonholes, we listen across genres; and isn't all music 'world music'? Music, of all the arts, transcends boundaries. I shall be talking about what I have to call 'classical music', not because it is better or worse than anything else, but because that is where my expertise lies.

The jargon term for music being marketed to us in these media pigeonholes is commodification. I am not a social scientist so cultural theory won't be my focus tonight. But a composer or a performer is not working in a vacuum: our professional lives are constantly shaped and re-shaped by the society we live in.

When I joined the Music Board of the British Arts Council in the late nineteen eighties, I thought I knew all about market forces, but discovering that music was referred to as 'product', I was disconcerted – I think that is the apt word. My kind of 'product' as a composer was defined by the acronym WCCM – Western Classical Contemporary Music – or more often simply WC. I have dedicated my life to music, not to the WC.

Looking back over the fifty or so years of my career, I realise that my story of how things were, is often different from the story as it appears in the history books. It is inevitable: it's a personal history. When I speak in public like this I am always conscious of my debt to the late author Ursula Le Guin. You may know her as a writer of science -fiction, but she was also an essayist of great insight. In 1986, writing of the language of social power, she quotes the composer Pauline Oliveras saying 'Offer your experience as your truth'. This inverts our ideas of objective and subjective observation – why is an objective statement prized above a subjective one? You can read Le Guin's essays in a collection called 'Dancing at the Edge of the World; she would have been an ideal speaker for a Sophia lecture.'

The context for my musical experiences and memories begins in the nineteen fifties. It's an era that gets rather short shrift in books, or in the academic

curriculum – maybe the authors can't wait to get to the swinging sixties. Actually, the 1950s were a good time for music in Britain. The Arts Council had been founded in 1946 and as its first Chair was Maynard Keynes, he made sure it had serious money from the Treasury. With funding available, music festivals sprang up all over the country: Aldeburgh, Bath, Cheltenham, Dartington, Edinburgh - (ABCDE) nearly enough for an alphabet, all the way to York. The festival of Britain in 1951 centred on a brand new concert hall, the Royal Festival Hall in London. But professional music was not always London-centred; the first fully contracted chamber orchestra was here in Newcastle, founded in 1958 by Michael Hall.

Equally important, probably more so, were effects from the advent of free secondary schooling thanks to RA Butler's Education Act of 1944. The long-term effect in music was notable. The London Schools Symphony orchestra, and then the various County Youth Orchestras that followed, created a new generation of musicians. They could go on to the profession, or become appreciative audience members, without having necessarily come from a background of privilege.

What of composers in the nineteen fifties? Vaughan Williams was a household name. When he died in 1958, he was buried in Westminster Abbey: lessons were halted in my school so that we could listen to the service on the radio, which we called the wireless. Benjamin Britten's star had been in the ascendant since the success of the opera *Peter Grimes* in 1945; his remarkable series of operas that followed helped create a renaissance for opera in this country. With growing patronage from the BBC, and with all this post-war infrastructure in place, opportunities for composers multiplied rapidly. Every festival wanted a big work to premiere; a new symphony or concerto from William Walton or Michael Tippett, Edmund Rubbra or Lennox Berkeley, Peter Fricker, Malcolm Arnold or Richard Arnell.

But not everyone had it so good: the fifties was not a good decade for women. Men returning from the war took back the jobs that women had held in their absence. The BBC's Controller of Music had been a woman during the war, but never before, nor since.

My mother was a professional musician, the composer Elizabeth Maconchy. Since her close friends were the Welsh composer Grace Williams and the Irish composer Ina Boyle, I assumed that it was a normal thing for a woman to be a composer; only as I grew up did I realise the extent to which music in Britain was run by men and for men. It was the land of the old boys' network, and new boys were welcome if they played the right games. For women in all fields, fortune flows in cycles; my mother had brilliant success in the nineteen-thirties but the nineteen-fifties were a time of eclipse. When she was a younger woman, music critics invariably put her name in headlines, noting her triumph at the Proms, or her success at international festivals in Paris or Warsaw. Yet a nineteen-fifties headline says simply 'housewife writes quartet'. It was not until the nineteen-sixties that she once again began to be

widely commissioned and performed, and finally, for her services to music, was decorated DBE - a Dame.

As you may imagine, my mother was a wonderful role model for me; she had such tenacity and determination, whatever the vicissitudes of a musical career, and she never lost her passionate dedication to her vocation as a composer.

The 1960s, when I became a music student, did indeed see big changes for women musicians. Where my mother, as a student, had been turned down for a scholarship 'because you will only get married and never write another note', my studies were funded without any such questions. I was the lucky generation who had free tuition, a maintenance grant, and in my case a traveling scholarship from the Essex County Council, since in those days local authorities could employ a big music staff with a budget to match: free instrumental tuition in schools, for example.

At University there were 35 of us studying music in my year, 30 boys and 5 girls; when I went on to the Royal College of Music, I was the only female composer in my cohort. But at no time was I aware of any gender discrimination: on the contrary, I had wonderful opportunities - my first public performances, broadcasts and a contract with a publisher.

Looking at old concert programmes and the list of commissions from Elizabeth Lutyens, Priaulx Rainier, Elizabeth Maconchy, Thea Musgrave, it might suggest that for a while there was parity of opportunity. These older composers did not think so - Lutyens complained that letters to her invariably began 'Dear Sir', and Priaulx Rainier's name was assumed to be that of a man; Thea Musgrave declared that London music was 'still just for men' and in 1973 she went to live permanently in USA. As for us younger ones, full of optimism, we never guessed how thick the glass ceiling would prove to be.

Music education in the nineteen sixties took a leap forward with the opening of new universities; their newly-founded music departments offered very different staff and curricula from the Kapellmeisters of Oxford and Cambridge. At Kings College London, the scholar Thurston Dart put a notice on his door: Abandon Counterpoint All Who Enter Here. In the department led by Wilfrid Mellers at York, all the staff were composers. But throughout academia there was a notable absence of female staff, and not until the 1990s did Universities or conservatoires give any positions of seniority to women.

Some time ago I saw a newspaper article about the composer James Macmillan, now Sir James, in which he described the music of the 1960s disparagingly as being over-intellectual, too dry and cerebral. For me nothing could be further from the truth. It was a heady time, an exciting explosive era. At the beginning of the decade, the newest music was certainly not mainstream: aficionados attended specialist concerts held in the Arts Council Great Drawing Room - unsayable words today. Audiences were small for all

kinds of what was still called 'serious music'. But since both the Arts Council and Local Authorities supported music financially, performers and managers alike felt emboldened and able to explore adventurous programming.

Musicians young and old were experimenting with new kinds of music making: performers became virtuosic in new techniques and new ensembles were springing up. Some were dedicated to exploring innovative ways of playing old music, and some to creating a platform for composers. The ensembles were typically small and flexible, and run more democratically than the long established orchestras. Two composers, Peter Maxwell Davies and Harrison Birtwistle, founded The Pierrot Players in 1967, and the London Sinfonietta began in 1968. Playing in the new Queen Elizabeth Hall in London, both groups attracted capacity audiences, and audiences mixed in age. The Sinfonietta's players were all ages too, from 22 to 72, and in their black turtle-neck sweaters they looked very different from orchestral players in traditional evening dress.

Since any ensemble or solo performer could apply to the Arts Council for funds to commission new work, composers had ample exposure and even an income from their work. Their foremost patron was the BBC. During his long tenure as Controller of Music, Sir William Glock championed music of the twentieth century, from early modernist works to the brand-new. It was still a time when broadcasting as entertainment was balanced by Reithian ideals of informing and educating. As part of BBC Radio's Third Programme, new music was heard in the appropriate context of new drama and poetry. Though people might make jokes about 'eggheads', the word intellectual was used positively, not pejoratively. Recalling the late sixties and early seventies, the musicologist Christopher Wintle wrote recently 'the memory of a blissful dawn remains: it was a time of high seriousness, when the quest for new means to match a new musical language was to the fore.'⁴

In 1973 I had the excitement of being commissioned to write my first big orchestral piece, for performance at the BBC Proms. I still remember the wonderful, physical sensation as the music came to life at the first rehearsal.

After the thrill of that Prom premiere, I went on a Harkness Fellowship to study in the United States. I had a semester in California, at Berkeley, but I was mainly based on the East Coast, studying in Boston and visiting New York.

California was very stimulating, full of innovation, experiment and activity. At Stanford, composers and technicians were working at night, when they could use the Pentagon's computers, to develop hardware and software for music, including the notation software that we now take for granted. In the driveway I saw for the first time a notice 'Beware of driverless vehicles'. Meanwhile at Mills College performers were attaching microphones to all parts of their anatomy to create 'body music' and in San Francisco, John Adams was introducing his students to the music of Gavin Bryars.

In Boston, though, things were very different. My fellow graduate students, all working for PhDs in Composition, were a shock to me. In the first place, none of them had any expectation of becoming professional composers in the sense that I and my British peers understood. We led portfolio careers, made up of composing to commission, part-time teaching, performing, editing or copying, and so on. My American counterparts aspired not to this, nor to working in film studios, but to tenured academic posts, teaching the next generation of composers.

I was equally surprised that they had heard so little of the European music that dominated the new music scene in Britain: Berio, Boulez, Lutoslawski, Ligeti, Stockhausen – these composers were frequent visitors to the UK, drawn by the excellence of performers and the lively engagement of the audiences. In Boston, the audiences were hidebound and separate: the Symphony audience, the Cantata audience, and new music playing only within the University. Outside academia, composers lacked resources. In the UK we had the British Music Information Centre, which had opened in 1968. National music centres were not just libraries of recordings and scores, they were also physical meeting places for anyone involved in new art-music. They flourished in Europe and Australasia for some 40 years, until their demise or transformation in the 21st century.

My time in the USA was fruitful because of my chance to study in Boston with the Korean composer Earl Kim, because of exploring a country of outstanding natural beauty, and because it enabled me to view music in Britain from outside. I realised how much had been achieved in the thirty years since the war and what a great European capital of music, London had become. The UK had invested in music and its infrastructure all over the country, inspiring amateurs and professionals alike. In the USA, wealthiest of countries, art-music was impoverished by a political culture that venerated the power of the dollar.

In 1979 I married the composer David Lumsdaine and to my busy life of composing and teaching, I now added raising a family. 1979 was the year that Margaret Thatcher was elected, and throughout the following decade the prevailing conservative climate gradually affected all aspects of the music profession. As adventurous programming declined, it became apparent that women composers had fallen off the radar. The opportunities that I had had, and my female peers, were not coming up for our female students. In 1986 I took three months off composing to research this properly, and found that while at least 15% of British composers were female, only 4% had received Arts Council bursaries, and none had been featured in the previous ten years of Arts Council regional touring. Similarly none had been featured in the South Bank Centre's regular flagship series 'Music of Eight Decades' and in ten busy and successful years for the London Sinfonietta, I found only one fifteen minute piece.

A group of us, men as well as women, created a celebration of music composed by women, performing it at the Camden Festival in March 1987. I read a paper with my thoughts on a culture that drew on the talents of only one half of its population and which presented the statistics from my research. A full page article in *The Guardian* reproduced them, and helped start a mini-revolution. The organisation 'Women in Music' grew out of this moment, with members drawn from all kinds of music - pop, folk, and film as well as classical. Over the next few years, opportunities appeared for a much more diverse range of musicians, and not only in terms of gender. One result of all the media attention was that I was asked to serve on the Arts Council's Music Board and to act as an advisor to various public bodies. It was good to feel part of a movement that was calling the establishment to account. As a student in the sixties I would have been shocked that this wake-up call was necessary, and it is salutary to consider to what extent the situation today has progressed.

Other changes were underway for the music profession. In the 80s the concept of public service began to be undermined. The change was so gradual that only after the Millennium did we realise what had been lost. Music teams and their budgets disappeared from local authorities, Arts Council funding became directed to large, building based companies, and very London-centric, and the economy underlying most musical endeavour began to look obsolete. You can read all about what Norman Lebrecht called 'the Cococol(a)isation of classical music' in his book of 1996 'When the Music Stops', in which he documents the corporate takeovers of music publishers, record labels and music agencies.

Yet an equally profound change in the 80s and 90s, was surely a positive one: the advent of digital technology. As computers shrank in size and cost, but grew exponentially in capacity, they became part of every composer's toolkit – our lives were transformed, first in practical ways and then conceptually.

To speak of practicalities it may be worth recalling that when I began my career, the way a score was produced had not changed materially since the time of Mozart. A score was written out in ink on pre-lined manuscript paper. Then every individual part, from piccolo to double bass, had to be copied out by hand - for an orchestral piece, that is hundreds of pages. The full score itself had to be bound - I sewed mine together with waxed thread. Benjamin Britten said of all this 'a composer is 95% a manual labourer' – and Elizabeth Lutyens said 'what I need is a good wife'. Even when Xerox machines came into general use, orchestral parts still needed hand-copying, though at least scores could now be reproduced.

With the advent of music processing software and the home computer, the life of the composer changed completely. After typesetting a score it looked like a printed, published score. No need to spend hours handcopying parts – sophisticated software programmes could extract each part, ready to print.

Today, even the need to print parts is receding rapidly, as players take to playing from digital devices like iPads.

Nor was music processing just a matter of printed scores: it could play them, as well. At first the sound was terrible, but as digital sampling improved, composers could play or record apparently authentic performances of their work. These days were a mixed blessing for the inexperienced – students were embarrassed when they came to rehearse with real humans and realised the music was impossibly high, or slow or fast, forgetting that computers don't have fingers or lungs or lips.

Hot on the heels of these changes came the internet. Now the composer could not only create a typeset score, but it could be sent and received immediately, worldwide, and so could its audio files. Just as the fax machine had been overtaken by email, so now the task of making copies of Cds was eclipsed in the 21st century by the ease of sharing files online.

These developments were liberating for composers and led to an upsurge of grassroots activity, as music circulated freely, first among friends and then far afield. As well as new work, there was soon a vast repertoire of music from the past available online. But as words like 'freely' and 'liberate' suggest, the economy of music took a further nosedive. If anyone could download a score, why should they pay for it?

Since performers could download their music for free, publishers retrenched, ending the contracts of most of their composers. Composers became self-publishing, and so of necessity, self-promoting. It can be argued, and has been, that this is a bad thing, because there is no element of peer-review. I don't agree; I think the plurality is healthy. However, there have been some unexpected and less desirable side effects of this online world of music.

The absence of royalties or commission fees means that composing begins to be something of a self-help cottage industry. Primary income comes from elsewhere - often from academia – and being a professional composer is pushed into so-called 'spare time'. As to live concerts, the fragility of the economy has meant much less adventurous programming. The jury is still out as to whether the constant availability of music online, means that people are attending less concerts.

For many of us, and not just the elderly, hearing music live is what it is all about. Why else do people queue for the proms, crowd into a pub on a folk night or pay huge amounts to go to a gig by a current celebrity? Yet performers in the classical field say that there are ever fewer dates in their diaries; less at music clubs, less visits to schools, fewer opportunities at festivals. There is still a lot of work in Europe for British performers, but for how much longer?

Certainly for composers, the message is stark: supply is much greater than demand! There are so many of us, and we would be deceiving ourselves if we thought that audiences were clamouring for new music. In 2008 the recording

label NMC put out a 4 Cd box-set of about one hundred songs by British composers – The NMC Songbook. It garnered exceptionally good reviews, but as one critic pointed out: do the public want them?

It is true that people who take it in their stride that visual art moves between abstraction and representation do not always make the same leap in music. Readers of poetry have accepted for a hundred years that a beautiful poem can have a successful formal shape that does not rely on rhyme or regular metre. Yet the changes in musical syntax during the twentieth century proved hard for audiences.

Many listeners still crave the familiar hierarchies of harmony and rhythm and don't feel at ease with music created through other means. They mourn what they feel is an absence of melody; yet an expressive line is present in all the music by my contemporaries which I know and love. The line may be simple, may be complex, may be initially elusive and not a tune for whistling, but we do not look for a comparable immediacy and accessibility in new poetry or visual art.

I would like at this point to play you a couple of very brief tracks from that NMC Songbook, because it doesn't feel right to talk about music for forty-five minutes without listening to anything. Although neither of the songs I shall play uses traditional tonality, I don't think you will have any difficulty in following them.

The first song is by the composer Anna Meredith, who was about thirty when she made this setting of a poem by the contemporary poet Philip Ridley. She wrote for counter tenor and harp, and this is the text of her song *Fin like a Flower*:

You wore your fin
 Like a flower
 And by petal
 And perfume
 Enticed me
 Beyond Land's End
 To your teeth
 Oh, consume me

CD track 15

In Anna Meredith's *Fin like a Flower*, the singer was Michael Chance, and the harpist, Lucy Wakeford.

The other song I shall play from that NMC Songbook is one of my own; again the harp is played by Lucy Wakeford, and this time the singer is a soprano, Elizabeth Atherton.

I chose a text from Christina Rossetti, *The Bourne*. Although the poem describes a graveyard, it is not dark or morbid; rather, it looks forward to death as a journey onwards.

Underneath the growing grass
 Underneath the living flowers,
 Deeper than the sound of showers:
 There we shall not count the hours
 By the shadows as they pass.

CD track 9

So has the audience for classical music lost its appetite for new music? I don't think so. The BBC's Radio 3 continues to make space for the new and unfamiliar, and its listening figures have not declined. Moreover the breadth of musical styles nowadays means that there is something for everyone. Statistics from orchestras give the lie to the idea that new music means a poor box office. All over England there are organisations and ensembles which have built up loyal audiences; they can include both familiar and unfamiliar music in their programmes. Conversely, a famous guest conductor or a big name soloist from overseas may have very little new music in their repertoire, certainly not new British music. A big name may be mainly concerned with their own career.

The Arts Council regularly commissions reports to examine audiences and their preferences, and to advise organisations how to create astute marketing strategies. Recent reports³ confirm that, with a few exceptions, it is easier to promote new music in London than elsewhere, that is if you, as a concert goer or indeed as someone listening right now to a living composer, if you accept being categorised as either a Metrocultural or a Commuterland Culturebuff – these are the people who are most likely to book tickets for chamber music, new music or early music.

Outside London, new music fares best where trust has been built up between the promoter and the audience. Thus in Huddersfield, almost all the concerts at the annual contemporary music festival are sold out. I have been to concerts of new work in rural parts of Northumberland or East Yorkshire where a small church or hall has been filled to capacity with an appreciative audience. The main difficulty for the promoter is not filling their hall, but getting together enough funding to pay the musicians properly, while keeping tickets at an affordable price.

In London, audiences are larger and more adventurous; a new audience has emerged, young and very enthusiastic, attending concerts in Shoreditch or

Hoxton or Peckham. The success of the Multi Story orchestra in bringing new music to a new audience is remarkable.

Nevertheless, most classical music requires attentive listening. It used to be said that music has suffered from our living in such a visual culture. But new art, video and film similarly demand close attention. And if, in a street, you glance at all the people wearing headphones and not looking where they are going, or when you realise that the vast majority of younger people listen to music while they are working or walking, or jogging or eating, you might say that we live in a very aural culture, but not one given to attentive listening.

A recent Guardian article began 'In the last 20 years of technological revolution, has any art-form been as transformed as music? The headline was 'Spotify attacks the last traces of meaning we give music', and the writer discussed both the way the streaming service provides personal playlists, anticipating and pre-empting its users' choices, and the fact that royalty payments to the creators of the music are so negligible as to be laughable.

Yet this ever-available stream of music is not the only challenge to attentive listening. We are an urban population who live in an extraordinarily noisy environment; noise pollution dominates our cities and we constantly try to filter sounds out, to make ourselves deaf to noise before it deafens us. If our sense of hearing is continually battered, what chance for listening, which means using our ears as acutely as possible, rather than using them to filter and exclude. Think of a field in which a brown hare sits with its long ears turning to catch every distant tiny sound; or think of a city child, wearing headphones as it threads its way through busy traffic.

I suspect that as the public becomes aware of the damage that noise is causing us, pressure will build to harnessing new technologies to combat it. All of us can play a role here, if we are alert to a problem as urgent as air pollution. (It is a health issue: nowadays only small children can hear the high frequencies that two generations ago were heard by almost all adults.)

Since I seem to be listing so many threats to classical music, it may be surprising that I feel optimistic about its future, and about prospects for composers in this country. For a start, there is still a lively tradition in the UK of composers working with musicians of all kinds, professionals amateurs, children. So although many of today's composers are employed in academia, they are active outside it and identify as professional composers; thus their role is very different to those composers whom I met in the USA at the start of my career. Moreover, there are still a large number of self-employed composers living by their art – if I look at those who studied at York during my time there, I think of the success of Kerry Andrew, Christian Mason, Anna Meredith. The issue their generation will need to confront is one of copyright: how are creators of art best protected in the digital age?

Another reason for my optimism is the prospect of what composers will discover as they enter the uncharted soundworlds offered by evolving digital technology. In the realm of art and architecture, hitherto undreamt of possibilities are opening up, and so it will be in music. A composer lives by their inner ear – their aural imagination. Technology does not replace this, it adds a new dimension. I have not mentioned electronic music in this talk, but ever since the composer Varese made his *Poème Electronique*, for Le Corbusier's pavilion in the Brussels world fair in 1958, composers have explored these magical extensions of their sonic palette.

Today a composer with a computer can create any sound or colour we want and can move it around us in three dimensional space; any live performance can be transformed in real time, and while players may be in a concert hall, they may also be part of an online ensemble who are playing in different parts of the world. Why should this be a threat? It is surely an opportunity. It can be an expansion and enrichment of our musical culture, and it is certainly likely to demand our attentive listening.

Earlier this evening I spoke about the role of women in our musical life; I gave the example of how when music began to flourish again in Britain after the second world war, women found themselves side-lined, and often ignored. Before beginning to write this lecture I looked at the various histories of twentieth century music that students use as textbooks. Almost without exception, such books make no mention of composers who happen to be female. They present a lop-sided culture, one that draws on the talents of only half the population. How is it in the twenty-first century? Is there reason for optimism?

Lately, social media and the press have been full of examples of women who have been denied equal opportunities, whether in the general workplace, the business world or in the arts. Writing in the *London Review of Books*, the Irish novelist Anne Enright gives the example of how fifty literary agents responded to a specimen chapter of a book (not hers). Only two responded favourably when the writer was female, but when she used a male pseudonym, 17 responded positively. Is it still the case that Mary Ann Evans needs to be George Eliot?

At the moment, music seems to be doing better than that. The Master of the Queen's Music is a woman – Judith Weir. There are women conductors in post across Britain; there is funding for orchestras and the BBC to rediscover some of the composers who have been neglected. My publisher, Edition Peters, has an almost equal roster of male and female British composers in its contemporary catalogue. Best of all, there are many younger composers, in their thirties or forties, who happen to be female and are being very successful. The Royal Opera House commissions Tansy Davies; Emily Howard has a series of commissions from the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic

Orchestra and a new opera next month at Aldeburgh. If I were to list all these eminent younger women, I would rapidly get to about thirty names. This seems to me a case for rejoicing.

Yes, I have a guarded optimism. It is guarded because fashions change, pressure groups come and go, and as far as women musicians are concerned, there has always been a cyclic pattern of good times and bad. The nineteen-sixties were a fortunate time, the eighties were not. If the composers I have been speaking of are still being performed over the next decades, then my hopes will have been truly met.

Creating a culture that draws on men and women equally, depends on all of us; whatever field we work in, we need to be ready to challenge unacknowledged prejudices. Creating a vital musical culture depends on us all too, which means many things. Certainly it means being alert to the sounds of the world around us; but it also means not losing sight of the ideal of public service. Artists and arts do not flourish for long in a climate of market competition, of each for himself. I share the views expressed by Benjamin Britten when he received the Aspen Award in 1964, and spoke of society's need for music, and the role of the composer in serving society; he wished to be of use to people, to enhance their lives.

Creating a vital musical life in twenty-first century Britain means cherishing those who make music as performers and championing the rights of creators. Especially, as we relish all the music that we can hear anywhere, anytime, it means not just hearing, but listening – listening attentively.

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