

When Trevor Pitt was preparing FLUID, the UK's first festival of Queer Music in Birmingham in 2017 (<http://fluidfestival.org>), I suggested making something for Birmingham's LGBT+ choir Rainbow Voices and Trevor said: "Yeah, possibly, but I'd really like to get away from it being about LGBT and focus more on Queer Music." That was the moment when everything changed in my head: the understanding of what it is that I do, what the term "Queer Music" meant to me and how it could help me gain confidence at a time when I felt like I was disappearing. In this article I'm not giving an overview of Queer Music, but instead share my very own perspective on it and how I came to realise that I had been making Queer Music all along.

My big confusion had been my assumption that "gay" and "queer" were synonymous. I realised that that wasn't necessarily the case. A lot of people who make queer art and music would define themselves as gay, Lesbian, non-binary, fluid etc, but on the other hand I know a lot of gay artists who wouldn't define their work as queer. My work is not about being gay but it's about queering situations.

Since that meeting with Trevor I've realised that the big drive for me when making pieces to queer things. I just never called it that. I didn't really have a word for it. When people asked me what I did I always said "contemporary music, but it's a bit different". This never seemed helpful or to be doing it justice. Now I know that my whole attitude to life is a queer one. It's more than a choice, but strategy for surviving in this world.

I grew up in a small village on the German-Dutch border in the 70s and 80s. Two distant members of my family were gay and the laughing stock of the village. As a young child, I was very much aware of how people talked about them, always degrading, always shaming. At school, a friend of mine came out as gay. Some people's reaction to that was to say that all gays should be gassed. When I finally knew that I was gay I was terrified. What scared me wasn't just the insults and shaming comments, but the real terror was the realisation that all those people, adults and kids, thought that it was ok to say such things. That properly messed with my perception of people. Suddenly, I didn't belong to the same world anymore. Not by making a decision, but by being who I was. When AIDS hit, society didn't hold back, calling it "gay cancer", a "punishment" for gay men's "unnatural behaviour". Being gay had become more than just shameful, it had become dangerous, not only because of the virus itself but because people had another reason to see gay men as the enemy of society.

Years later, when gay marriage was publicly discussed, people felt comfortable enough to openly say that it was unnatural again for two men or women to get married. Even German chancellor Angela Merkel clung to not legalising same sex marriage until 2017 because to her that demand had been "a step too far". However, now people seem totally happy to ask me and my partner if we are going to get married, meaning now that we are allowed to do things that everybody else has always been allowed to do, are we going to do it so we become part of proper society? And they always seem surprised when I say that we prefer not to get married and we'd rather prefer to be accepted for being different. There are still 72 countries in the world where same sex sexual activity is criminalised, most of them explicitly refer to sex between men, almost half of those countries are in the Commonwealth. So, when I think about my next holiday destination I think: should I go to a country where people openly - and with legal support - despise of gay men? That makes the world a lot smaller.

And then there is that other unique thing in the life of a person who belongs to a sexual orientation minority, that moment that you are dreading like you never dreaded anything else: your "coming out". Coming out basically means "confessing" your sexual preference in front of people who usually mean a lot to you and then hoping that they won't cry or shout or abandon you forever. Yeah, of course, it can be empowering, but that fact that we have to go through this, isn't. Hoping for approval from others is not a nice situation to

be in. Every time I apply for money to do a new project or send a piece to a competition or ask for support for my work, a considerable chunk of that “coming out” fear of rejection returns.

All this has shaped me. How could it not? It’s massive. It has fundamentally shaped who I am, my view on society and the world and, crucially, my art making. I feel like an “other”, one of many individuals who are not part of the general pool of society. I’m not living “at the edge” or outside society, but as an “other” within society.

Wherever you turn you find tons of rules and people telling you how to do things. It’s the same in the world of music. The attitude I have come across most is: learn how to do things properly first and then you can experiment. In other words: first you have to accept the ways that society has decided things should be done, then eventually and a long way down the line and if you haven’t lost the will to live, you may be allowed to do things your way. Alternatively, you could just do things your way from the start and pick up all the knowledge you need along the way.

I was never interested in blindly following rules that society presented me with. I have always looked for alternatives (except for cooking... I have channelled all my obedience into following recipes), made up my own fabulous games, found the really weird programmes on TV. As a teenager I improvised on the piano for hours, accompanied by my whole family shouting: “Can’t you play something normal?”

In the same way I have always looked for the odd element, the “other”, when making art. I was fascinated by the fact that in the ancient Greek play “Antigone” Sophocles forgot to let the main character’s sister, Ismene, exit the stage. She already has nothing to do in the play and then she didn’t even get to leave properly: I made a show about her. Or I got fascinated by the recorder because it’s an amazing neglected instrument that most people don’t take seriously (I once offered a well-respected composer my double album of recorder music as a present. She looked at it, laughed and said: “Darling, I’m never going to listen to that.”)

At the beginning of the 2012 performance of my piece *Monsterwalzer* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nJCmmGm4G5k>) the conductor Edwin Roxburgh enters the traditionally laid out stage while a few people start clapping. He then leaves again, only to return a few seconds later alongside players appearing and disappearing through doors. If you watch the video you’ll notice that the audience don’t quite know what to do with that situation. That’s the moment when I am most excited. Some people in the audience are confused, some are intrigued. There is an “otherness” about this performance in this highly traditional and familiar setting and because of this otherness you can’t trust it like you could trust the traditional ensemble piece that had happened just before in the programme. The situation had been queered.

Similarly, in my first big BCMG commission *Neighbours for a Night* (2004) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=66vZ--rBq6Q>) I rehearsed and then sang a song together with the whole audience as part of the performance. This changed the atmosphere in the hall completely and took the event very far away from the expectations and behaviour at a traditional contemporary music concert. Some people cheered, some walked out and the critics didn’t know what to do with this at all (<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2004/dec/14/classicalmusicandopera>).

In 2018 I wrote a Queer Concerto for 9 Saxophones and Orchestra (<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/915432/1082627>), where I tried out several ways of queering: I queered tonal language, Baroque music as well as the concert situation. However, like most of my works the piece isn’t explicitly **about** a particular aspect of being queer like Mary Ellen Strom’s *Nude No 5* (<https://highlike.org/text/mary-ellen-strom/>) Wolfgang Tillmans’ *The Cock (kiss)* (<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/tillmans->

[the-cock-kiss-p79302](#)) or Felix Gonzales-Torres' lovely piece *Untitled (Go-Go Dancing Platform)* [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hrfZYGQIJJo>], where he's making very clear references to gay club culture. I'm sure lots of people wouldn't even recognise my work as "queer". Instead my queerness is in the process of investigating, highlighting and presenting the "other". My intention is to queer. I'm not concerned about whether people receive my work as queer. What's important to me is that when a percussionist knocks over some instruments as a noisy fake accident in the Queer Concerto, the concert situation is no longer "normal". Anything could now happen.

I think it's an enormous achievement that, while society re-branded the word "gay" to describe something negative, we have managed to take the word "queer", which initially was a derogatory term for homosexuals, and use it to celebrate difference and "otherness". It's this celebratory aspect together with a little bit of outrageousness, rebellion and mischief that makes "queer" the perfect word to describe my attitude towards art making. I admit that I enjoy the fact that some people might not know exactly what to do with what I present to them...it brings out that slight mischievous smile that I had on my face when my family slammed the door to the living room where I had been hammering repeated chords as loud as I could on the piano for the last hour.