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Composer · Conductor

Composing In Spite Of

I want to talk about the challenge to the living “modern-traditional” composer of remaining true to the canon and roots of our art while living in a materialistic, commercialized Western society that has for over 70 years been increasingly drenched with omnipresent canned music of all types, particularly of the commercial types.

My thesis is that the terrible but inevitable synergy of recorded sound, broadcasting of all types, and commercialism has immersed anyone who lives in the real world in a toxic soup of blended, pasteurized musical mediocrity that can have debilitating effects on the musical artist.

If you grew up in America listening to the radio, live music broadcasts, talk and news and drama shows with sound tracks and “themes,” and then TV (my first show was the Army/McCarthy hearings, mind you, no music track, just pure evil) and sound movies in theatres and drive-ins, and then supermarket and stadium PA systems, plus recordings (from 78 RPM vinyl through all the technologies to MP3s on iPods and beyond), you were *increasingly saturated with everything*, from the best to the worst. But before we consider the dangers of recording per se, let’s look at the degradation of genres by commercialism.

Of course I am a snob, in the sense that I consider the art form I pursue—the basically Western concert music to which I have devoted almost 60 years of compositional sweat—to be superior to other types/genres of good Western music. *But not more valid.* I enjoy many vital types of non-classical music, even if they are not at the same level of complexity, depth, or evolution, or in the same universe as classical music. My car-radio channels include Country/Western—honestly, if you drop your guard, sometimes a good old-fashioned 3-chord song with an a cappella breakdown of a fine close-harmony chorus at the end really hits that heart spot in a way that nothing classical can—and jazz/blues, and guitar rock (oldies only, please), and my CD’s include Sufi and Bulgarian Women’s Chorus and big band swing and blues and Steely Dan and Beatles and The Band and so on. (Oscar Wilde, I believe, once commented, “You can say what you like, but when all is said and done there is nothing quite so potent as cheap dance music.”) The two streams just serve different purposes, feed different needs. It’s all music.

But what about the levels below those? What I most struggle to resist is the degrading influence of the watered-down, third-generation commercial and diet pop drivel that accompanies radio talk shows, sports shows, advertisements, jingles, TV shows of all genres, big-money movies (though perhaps not fine art films), and now, video games (these I cannot play). All of it double-derivative, debased ghosts of real, vital music, either Art or Pop. All of it existing not for its own sake but *purely* for the sake of money, to provide aural glitter or window dressing or sonic *mise en scene* for a product. (Mind you, I’m not saying the folks who write it lack skill or talent; nor do most of them harbor any self-delusions about what they create. They also make a Lot of Money, some of them, and there is, after all, no arguing with commercial success in America. . .)

And even in the arena of what was once vital entertainment music, much of that has also become pure commercial musical product. Example: Corporate Rock became so commoditized that its creation and growth was for decades driven by marketing people rather than by the rock and pop artists themselves or even by A&R wizards. Now, of course, the Internet, YouTube, iTunes, and other digital paths to bypass the A&R bottlenecks of the media giants may spare us some of the “quality-leveling” and packaging that overrides content or style or originality/grit (listen to Procol Harum’s later 10 albums—SO boring, all to formula), but by now many of those styles have become so degraded that it hardly matters. Jazz alone survives with its integrity largely intact—because there is so little money to be made in it . . .

Gradually everything in commercial music has turned into this giant permeating stream of high fructose corn syrup and artificial flavor and color and fizz, like Diet Pop, and it all starts to sound the same. (Frank Zappa: “I am the slime from your audio, can’t stop the slime, baby look at me go.”) And if you go out in the world like a normal person, you have it flung in your ears all the time—the only way to escape it is to be like the late beloved hermit genius Gorecki and live unplugged, perhaps in a giant hollow cedar tree trunk on a mountainside.

And at the same time as I am bemoaning the degradation of vital pop styles by commercialism, I am also warning that recordings per se (and also MIDI and sampled sounds, a topic for a separate essay) have been equally a blessing and a curse. Yes, full disclosure: There is a lot of great classical repertoire that I might never have gotten to hear without recordings during my formative years as a composer and performer. But recordings take us far, far away from real music. **My goal is: Live music first, everywhere and always.** Whatever steps away from that is less than true music—even broadcasts of live performances lose something. You miss the sweat of the performers, you miss the *work* that is required to make music. Result: several generations of Americans (and kids all around the world) have grown up thinking of music, all music, as **a commodity that just comes out of a box or an earbud, something you buy by the carton, like eggs, or download singly from the digital vending machine.** Even with the new online social networking and people blogging about studio sessions and the rough life of the rock (or classical) star, few except those who were in choir or band or orchestra in school or who sing in local choirs and play in local ensembles as adults get the life experience that can help them understand the huge work that must be done to create and perform art music—and particularly, to perform it *well*.

Another danger of the universal dispersal of recorded sound is overexposure of even the Western classical composer to the broad canon itself: With 1000 years of past repertoire out there to listen to in recordings, you have every past art music genius composer looming over your shoulder as you struggle to find your own voice and say something musically meaningful that is rooted in the canon. Try writing something original with that on your back. Past composers had to master and contend with only their current style and perhaps the previous generation’s. (Beethoven once wept, overhearing a Mozart quartet played by upstairs amateurs in Vienna, and when asked why, said: “If I live to be 100, I

will never do what Mozart did”. And he was *Beethoven!*) Sometimes one might wish not to have such a wealth of possible past influences to either absorb or ignore. Seriously.

So here I am, trying to write something new and fresh and original that is still firmly and honestly and vitally rooted in the past of art music, without just aping or echoing past composer’s styles and signatures and riffs, or—worse, I feel—watering down my muse with commercial influences. But I have been overexposed, sometimes by (naïve) choice and sometimes not, to 1000s of hours of various kinds and levels of other canned music. The worst effect is probably that of film music, because for so long it made such a chopped salad (or parodistic/parasitic *ersatz*) out of the great orchestral composers whom, until recently, it cheerfully stole from or imitated (and betrayed). Of course now, listeners think looped junk-pop riff clips and pseudo-busy shifting “orchestrated” pattern-textures represent form (video games have done that, thriving in an era of shrinking attention spans with random plot/action branching—here flavor, sensation, atmosphere is everything, form and structure nothing).

So how do I avoid just writing more cliché film cues or over-orchestrated videogame loops when I want to write something that (at least in my view) is Art, that is, something that stands on its own two feet musically, for its own reasons, and exists (and comes into existence) for its own sake, *ars gratia artis*, to illuminate the human soul, not as a money-slave to the visual editing of a cinematographic genius or the episode-branching logic of a UX designer?

Answer: The same way I do everything as a composer: **By listening intently and critically to my inner musical voice.**

I have absorbed something from every music I have ever really listened to. Not memorized it, just soaked it up. I can write fluently in many past classical styles, for fun at least. (Carlos Chavez once commented that you don’t really know a past composer’s style until you can write in it yourself.) Everything I have ever truly heard (which excludes the sludgiest background music) thus contributes to my unconscious pool of potential ideas, a frothy brew that through my own inner spiritual-musical-emotional fermentation generates the “new” for me. And I don’t mind sounding a little derivative of past masters; I am still occasionally surprised (on a later hearing) to discover that a tune I thought was original to me is a twisting of something I heard long ago, yet I did not *consciously* steal or imitate it—even my own father’s music, sometimes. I compose largely out of melodic ideas that just come, thank God.

But when materials come too easily to me in my inner ear *and* I realize that they sound like near-pop or film or video game, I set them aside, or, rather, *I step aside from them like Kryptonite*. Ironically, during my brief period of writing cues for instructional videos to get a living, I would occasionally experience the reverse: I would sketch a tune meant as background music and realize quickly that it was just too fine to waste on a “cue,” and I’d set it aside—to keep and use later. (My video editor kept saying “too melodic, David, just write whole notes, man!”) The famous aching first theme of my *Elegy* for strings

came to me in search of a slow wistful cue line and I set it aside for Art. The piece that it generated is my most popular work for string orchestra.

In short, I fight the watering down, the getting compromised, by *fierce self-critical listening*. Every piece, as I build it, has moments where I am struggling to do something brilliant and then realize (or admit to myself) that I could just do something simple and obvious and it will be fine. Often that is OK. But sometimes the path of least resistance just sounds trite, commercial, too easy, lazy even. And (aping Dr. Johnson) I cut that part out and seek something a little tougher on me and on the listener. Because classical music is not an easy chair or ear candy. It is created to simultaneously challenge and nourish the soul.

Of course, every modern American (and European) composer is most likely tempted at least once to write something jazzy; I have certainly done so. My Flute Sonata has a candy-arsed jazz waltz in it (with an improv section on some odd chords which my flutist friend Ellen Burr, an amazing improviser, made a 4-course meal of), but it is candidly titled “It Ain’t Necessarily Jazz” (and yes, it does quote Gershwin). But generally when I move towards jazz, I incorporate it into something bigger and formally integrated. I don’t string together various artificially-sweetened jazz riffs packaged with scoring and call it concert music. I’m actually kind of proud of that.

So for me it is about constant listening for purity of intent and impulse—and execution. Constantly asking:

What does it sound like?
Does it just sound nice and appealing but not my voice?
Does it sound like what I intended?
Does it say what I am trying to say (emotionally, of course—since music per se cannot denote anything concrete)?
Does it evoke past masters without simply aping them—or just play back the latest plunderphonic jam I got off some CD?

Those are my scourging questions, and I am ruthless with myself when I think I am off track.

It is a lonely path. I do not go for the latest sensation, even though certainly today (with the virtual metastasis of viral digital propagation) it is easier to grab the brass ring of notoriety with pop or crossover references or sensational effects and textures in lieu of form or content. I just write what I hear (to paraphrase Diego Rivera) and what I think is true. So far, according to performers and listeners, the result has been OK.

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