

The composer David Avshalomov's path to his style

When I was a young percussionist and timpanist in the 60s and 70s, of course I was drawn to new music because it gave the lowly drummer much more to do than the old classics, and the novelty made it fun—at least to perform. At first I did not notice or care that little and less of this music ever made me want to hear it again, nor left me humming its tunes nor remembering the beneficial purging emotions it evoked. As I became more exposed to the exploratory and experimental waves of the 20th Century, these kinds of modernisms began to seem more and more bleak, empty, overcomplex, ugly and desperate (and the more recent reaction waves felt embarrassingly simplistic and saccharine). They simply did not speak to me as music, they did not touch my heart or my soul. So all these trends rolled over me like the in-between waves when I boogie-board at Santa Monica beach, and I passed through unscathed, with a reinforced devotion to the virtues, means, and life-force of past Western tonal musical traditions, and an ever-stronger determination to draw my musical strength from old roots and yet always strive to make something new.

Unscathed—but not entirely unaffected. To be fair, I don't entirely ignore the innovations and experiments and effects and modern harmonies and rhythms that I heard as an impressionable youth and self-taught composer. What has been heard cannot be unheard. Thus occasionally I toy with a judicious, limited application of one or another extended technique or effect or atmosphere—but not as my whole cloth. It is always in support of a deeper musical purpose. I use these little gimmicks only to flavor or spice or amplify the musical progress in some way (notable—and rare—examples would be my wind-themed pieces, Sacred Winds, 3 Outside, There's a Wind). I select, I borrow, I flirt. But I never try to make a whole music out of these techniques because I am not an “experimental” composer looking to stand music as we know it on its head or turn it inside out (been done, didn't produce anything worthy that I have heard).

Nor am I a “splatter-effects-textures-atmospheres = content” type of composer. I do not believe this is a meaningful pursuit, especially since you can program your PC to do it. I think the “flash” sensationalist approach is like pretending you can make a satisfying and nourishing meal out of spices, herbs, salt, pepper, mustard, hot sauce, with no nutrients. Every new sensation wears off and dulls quickly, like the latest weird pop flavor of superhot snack chip (chipotle ginseng, anyone? Garlic sherbet?).

And I am with Hovhaness, who said "atonality is against nature." After trying to pursue more dissonant paths in early works like my String Quartet (where I came umbilically close to serialism but escaped), I woke up one day and admitted to myself "I am a tonal composer, and there is no shame in that. In fact, it is my strength." I never lost it, that was always where my heart was, I just got distracted for a while trying to be "original" in abstract, disconnected ways promoted by others. And now tonality is back in style, everyone flocks to make a (sort of) tonal-wash sound; what irony. Meanwhile I and my ilk have been continuing to perfect the modern tonal art all along. (Take a number please; line starts at the rear.)

In simple, I write tunes. Strong, evocative, expressive, well-structured tunes. Melody is the thread of my daily life.

More broadly, I still vigorously employ all the established, native elements of music that make it *real music*, alive and organic and vital: melody, motive, counterpoint; scale/mode, key, harmony (20th-century modern tonal). I use pulse, meter, polymeters, rhythm. I write developmental, through-composed, thematic/motivic music that is conservative/romantic, expressive, emotional. And I build my structures and expression on this base to craft forms that bend (but do not break) the old forms which I have studied and loved. And occasionally I contrive a new form—but it is a form, not just a sequence of events.

Like Haydn, I strive for beauty. I want to create music that is both touching and enduring. I do not pander or play to the lowest common denominator with easy borrowing and unselfcritical prettiness per se; I can also write hard, strong, even bitter music when needed. And I seek a universal expression of the human soul and also of the glory and power of nature—and its recent, spiralling, human-induced fragility and vulnerability. My themes when I set text tend increasingly towards nature, love, human rights, and social justice.

My strongest modern compositional influences have been my father Jacob and grandfather Aaron, Bartok (especially the Mikrokosmos and children's piano pieces on Roumanian, Hungarian, and Bulgarian folk songs), Mahler, Shostakovitch, Britten, Roy Harris, Copland, Barber, Hovhaness, Gershwin, Vaughan Williams, Milhaud, Antheil, Carlos Chavez, and Janacek, but also Spike Jones, early/middle Frank Zappa, and Dave Brubeck. And as an autodidact I also learned (as Schoenberg did) from Des Prez, Praetorius, Lassus, Victoria, Sweelinck, Dowland, Byrd, Tallis, Handel, Vivaldi, Zelenka, JS Bach (also CPE), Purcell, Haydn, Beethoven, Smetana, Dvorak, Brahms, Bruckner, Wagner, Liszt, Verdi, Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff, and yes, my dear, even Puccini.

So my music is rich in allusion (but not just obvious borrowing or blatant imitation). When it openly evokes past composers to a substantial degree, there is a good reason (Trotzky's Train is a *period* piece, deliberately so, as the judges of the American Prize noted when it won a special citation.) Yet I am told that overall, in almost 60 years of composing, I have gradually found a distinctive voice and established signature gestures and sounds that are neither derivative nor just quirky, which some consider the mark of a great composer.

Although heeding Cesar Franck's caveat to his students that the composer need not try to be a genius in every bar, still I try for something fresh; call it new wine in old bottles if you like, or "Old-fashioned with a twist." That's what satisfies my heart and soul—and, I find, the hearts and souls of most performers and listeners. As Martin Luther said to the tribunal, "*Hier steh ich, ich kann nicht anders . . .*"

Finally (as I expound at length in a separate essay, "Composing in Spite of"), I have staunchly resisted being suborned by the pervasive, intrusive, pandemic sludge of money pop and junk commercial music all around us since the invention of recording and broadcast and digital media and the Internet and UTube, and I have fought any impulse to do "crossover" in my concert music. That always strikes me as a desperate ploy to avoid admitting that one has run dry but still wants some of the flashy star attention that diet pop purveyors harvest. And let's not kid ourselves, pop music needs no help from us marginalized classicists. I believe classical, non-pop music is special, *kadosh*, and I work to help keep it that way with worthy fresh examples (not mere snobbery or elitism). Mind you, no American composer is immune to the influence of Jazz (nor should be, I

feel), so you'll hear the occasional echo or chord . . . but I know better than to try to write any jazz for real, though I will sing the blues after a couple of beers.

PS:

I also believe in **live music always and everywhere** and that everyone should be free or freed to sing, unamplified, and with others. When was the last time you sang out loud? Do it as soon as you can! And then go for a walk in nature. Do it today!