

This Music Is About . . . ?

by Steve D. Matchett

When I write music, I am totally absorbed in the music itself, with its internal relationships and its own peculiar narrative. Coming up with a title for a movement or an entire piece is usually pretty hard for me, since the origins of the work are mostly decisions about which combination of instruments to use, what they can do together, and what melodies / harmonies might lend them a strong expressive forum. Basically said, purely "musical" stuff, that is hard to translate into a word or small phrase. I think an appropriate title helps listeners and performers find a focal point for what the piece is about expressively. I also think there are too many composers who are all about the "concept," and not enough about skill. The composer has to master his/her technical abilities and present them to the musicians, who present them to the audience. The completely humbling and overwhelming aspect of being a composer, is that the learning never stops, as all musicians know. Mastering an instrument and its repertory is a lifetime quest, but the composer has to handle an extremely large picture. Not only trying to understand the capabilities of the instruments, but how they work together. It's all very daunting and exciting all at once.



My music is what is referred to as "tonal." This means that the music is organized around certain harmonic centers and aims to give a sense of key. Modern composers sometimes use many tonal "poles" around which the music can be organized. Basically, we are freer to keep those poles in a state of flux than composers of earlier eras. The modern ear can accept a lot more, and the social conventions that dictated the limitations of the music are far less stringent. This all sounds very theoretical and historical, and it is. The dichotomy in contemporary classical music exist between *tonal* and *serial* music. Serial music is far more esoteric, and more difficult listening than traditionally tonal music. Serialism changes the hierarchy of the tones, making them more equal to each other. I'm not particularly against it and will not give up my recordings of late Stravinsky for anything. The fact exist though that serial music has low social resonance, and is appreciated by connoisseurs of a certain musical taste. In contemporary classical music, tonal works can push the bounds of intricacy and sophistication. I prefer *tonality* because for me the interplay between consonance and dissonance is what drives the rhetoric of the music, and helps create its narrative. This is a traditionalist view I know, but I think traditionalism is thought about too negatively these days.

The more I compose the more I realize that *music composition* has little to do with *music theory*. This might surprise most college educated musicians out there who remember their hours and hours of studying chord i.d., modulations, part-writing, non-harmonic tones, and the rest of it. These basic skills learned in music theory class are brought to bear in composing. For me though, composing is about finding the appropriate "compositional gesture." When sketching out a piece, these found gestures have to be skillfully put together and have to coalesce into a

comprehensible whole. This is where composing gets really humbling! This is also where the miracle of music composition comes to be appreciated. I believe all musicians should try their hand at composing, if for no other reason than to gain a new appreciation for what miracles musical creations can be. I become more in awe of my favorite works as I realize the skill and knowledge that were needed to produce them. I come to understand more and more the works that I have always loved. My professor, Dr. James Marks, emphasized that *musical analysis* was a heightened form of *music appreciation*. I agree with that strongly, because it takes what appears to be the dry study of musical scores and transforms it into an emotional knowledge, and I really like thinking of it this way.



Compositional skill is so much about *interplay*. We study the discipline of counterpoint — i.e., the way the musical lines interact with each other. Béla Bartók spoke of the "mystery of counterpoint." Counterpoint is a mystery in so many ways. And despite our efforts at studying it, by tearing it apart and putting it back together, the way it forms a work of art remains an elusive thing. I try hard to search for the kind of interplay that I would like to hear; this is about all a composer can do. We can't become Bach or Bartók themselves (both men being incredible

contrapuntalists), but each composer has to use their taste and knowledge to find their own way. Interplay is not just about note against note counterpoint, but also the interplay between instruments, and the interplay between different aspects of the music's structure.



What is my music about? I hope that it is mostly about the love of music itself, and a desire and curiosity to explore it as an art form. Simply put, I love writing down the sounds that I want to hear, and organizing them into something with cohesion and meaning. Composers struggle for decades sometimes to be accepted and noticed, and anyone who seriously pursues composition has to be prepared for a long and patient slog. What I wish for myself, is that my energy and time can come more into balance so that I can compose a lot more.

- Steve D. Matchett, November 24, 2009

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Any questions you would like to ask, or feedback that you wish to give, is always appreciated!

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