

## **Music in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and the Outlook for the New Millennium**

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### **Abstract**

Music composition at the turn of the century. Constantinides addresses issues of disconnect between the composer and audiences; and between composers themselves. He discusses the problem of contemporary music without acknowledging the past and the current educational composition techniques. He addresses the dilemma with composing for the public or academia and calls for personal, heart-felt composition in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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## 1. Introduction

Over the years, the art of music has created many important disciplines such as theory, musicology, performance, and music education. Let us not, however, forget that the first and most important discipline is composition itself. Composition is and has been the generating power around which the other disciplines have developed.

As we know, composition has been a fact of life from the very start of human existence. Primitive man was making sounds that were a part of his personality and his behavior by singing and by using various instruments. Hence composition itself is an expression of inner thoughts and therefore a unique manifestation of every individual. The fact that every composer wishes to say something for the first time that nobody else has said before is not just an ego trip. It is the inner voice of every human who wishes to send a message to another human. It is simply a communication process.

The second and equally important of the composer is the desire to present this message in a meaningful and convincing way. At this point, the other disciplines enter: theory to make this inner voice function well, musicology to examine it, performance to present it in the best possible fashion, and music education in general to teach others to understand it. Of course, all the above vary in execution over the years due to different locales, cultures, and individual traditions.

For the most of us, the basis of our musical expression derived from the European tradition of the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Great music was created during this period indeed. Local proximity produced specific way of composing. However, with the communication achievements and developments of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, created through technologies such as the computer, radio telephone, and television, expanded travel opportunities, and so on, the human now has global resources in his possession as sources of inspiration, something that the composer of previous centuries did not have. This abundance of resources generated innumerable options. As a result, all the disciplines of music were affected and expanded. Also, many controversies were created. The basis of composition, however, remains the same: it is the fundamental and most important discipline. It is always an expression of inner thoughts and a unique expression of every individual. All the other changes concern the manner in which these thoughts or messages are communicated to other humans. Strangely though, these changes in communication have created animosity among the composer themselves and have moved our audiences away from our music. This alienation has been the main characteristic of composition throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, one

not shared by others to the same extent.

It is not my purpose here to examine the reasons for this strange outcome. It is only my wish to find remedies at the opening of the new millennium. It is also a call to our colleagues and fellow composers to participate in the search for remedies to bring the composers back together and to bring our audiences closer to our music again.

## 2. New Music and the Audiences

In my inaugural statement as the CMS Board Member for Composition, I raised a concern regarding the split of the common concert-goers from music produced by our composers in our times and throughout most of the twentieth century. This is a situation that is not shared with the other arts of drama, art, sculpture, poetry, and dance. It seems, on the contrary, that the other arts have a good relationship with their patrons. This is something we composer should discuss in order to find possible solutions with the opening of our new millennium. I would like to share with my fellow composer of my thoughts regarding this matter.

I believe a major reason for the above-mentioned split is due to some of the attitudes of modern composers toward the audience. I would like to mention the following:

- (1) The expansion of the education curricula limits the amount of study and therefore the understanding and love of the great composers of the past. Thus, their music is becoming foreign to the young composers and generally unappreciated. Many believe that they can contribute to the cause of music in our times by disregarding completely what was contributed in the past. In fact, a shortcut in their study is becoming necessary and encouraged by many of our important institutions. The flux of new demands to cover “world music” in curricula makes cuts unavoidable in traditional music courses, including composition. This, along with the lack of many classical programs in the media, makes this music not a big part of the background of our young composers.
- (2) Audiences as a whole do not adhere to this state of affairs. In fact, they begin their interest and love for good music through the classics, and eventually, acquiring more familiarity and sophistication, they move to the realms of new music. Thus, the audiences and the young composers have different basic music experiences, so the split begins here.

- (3) It seems to me that the “music of the world” idea means to many the expulsion of music that flourished and was nourished in Europe. Why? Europe is a part of the world, too. This music is not just loved by the Europeans. It is loved by the entire world. Do the violin geniuses from China or Japan spend years and years of hard work on their instruments only to perform music of the world, excluding the European violin concertos of Mendelssohn, Mozart, and Beethoven? It would be ludicrous for them to do this just because their country is not in Europe.
- (4) As I recall, there has been and probably still is a notion that the American production in composition is of lesser important if it includes some of the components prominent in European works. Connections of this kind of are not looked on favorably, but the idea of connections is very obscure to being with. Connections such as scales or harmonic patterns, instrumentations, or familiar forms? What does it matter? Personality can cut through all this. For instance, I can distinguish, as many can, the works of Copland, and I can see how American they are and how uniquely beautiful they are. In spite of the “European connections” mentioned above, they are definitely not inferior to the works of European composers.
- (5) Music created today that has some relationships with traditions is considered by young composers to be “conservative” and therefore not good and not worthy. This problem is even encouraged by senior composers at important institutions whose works themselves are connected with the past – a paradox indeed. I gently point out to my own students that the most successful composers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, both American and European, are also connected with the past.
- (6) Returning to the subject of composition education, it seems to me that a great many young students of composition do not know or are not eager to know the quartets of Beethoven, the operas of Mozart, and the songs of Schubert. I hear many times from the teachers themselves: “Don’t worry about it. There is a new way of teaching and learning composition.” Do present-day artists not student Leonardo da Vinci? Do present-day drama not study Shakespeare?

In summary, some teachers in colleges and universities have cut out the basics in their approach to creating and understanding new music, but the audiences have not, so we lose them. I sincerely hope in this new century that composers will reach each other out to the audiences again — the good audiences- those that should have could be our patrons. I am

certainly tired of hearing some of these good people say: “Oh, this is going to be a contemporary music concert. I can’t go; I have something else to do.”

### 3. Composition in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

As a follow-up to my two previous articles regarding the future of new music in the 21<sup>st</sup> century I would like now to share more of my thoughts from a different perspective. As mentioned before, the composer of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and specifically in the late 1950s, was plagued with pressure from the composition establishment to compose only certain types of music in regards to style and methods. The 12-tone system was a must for a composer who wished to be seriously considered, and the elements of repetition, folk resources, and tonal considerations were arbitrarily excluded from serious music. This, of course, eventually created a rebellion, which was manifested in various ways by the so-called “isms” such as minimalism. This rebellious search for new paths resulted in the over-use of extended techniques, to a point where many works were nothing more than exhibitions of new sounds that made no musical sense. This whole tendency was over-indulged, by academia in particular, to a point where the audiences was completely excluded from the process. Lately, another trend prevails, which comes from the opposite direction. The super-intellectualism of the serial heritage and the extended techniques of the immediate past are being replaced by the populism of the entertainment industry, which goes hand in hand with the ubiquitous availability of computer resources.

Acaedmia’s enthusiasm for these “isms” is always short-lived. I have frequently heard the phrase “... there is a new way of composing...” from my colleagues. The commercial success of this movement, as manifest by its active use by the media of television, radio, etc., has created second thoughts in the minds of aministrators of symphony orchestras, comminuity series, and even opera houses. The overwhelming need for abundant itickets sales has prompted the idea of muisic making using pops, jazz, and rock elements as a major draw for the public. This business attitude is that “in the audience comes to the pops concers, it will eventually come to the classical halls as well.” Of course, the reality is that the opposite happened. The audience of the classical concerts was diverted to the pops concerts because they offered easier listening. This left the concert halls half empty when Beethoven, Mozart, Bartok, Stravinsky, and the like gathered for a musical conversation.

This whole situation has had an impact on the vulnerable young composer, who wants

and needs some kind of appreciation. In order to gain this appreciation, the above mentioned elements of so-called “light” or “popular” music have entered the composer’s mind as a very important source of inspiration. Of course, Bela Bartok and other great composers used folk music, but in a very personal way filtered through their own distinctive compositional styles. Nowadays, this is not good enough, commercially speaking: the elements of folk music, rock, zydeco, etc., should be immediately recognizable so that a mere orchestration of known tunes and rhythms promises immediate success. I have had two experiences regarding these matters and I would like to share.

An association in my native city of Ioannina, (Epirus) Greece commissioned me to write an opera on the like of Olympias, the mother of Alexander the Great. Olympias was born in Epirus and thus the idea was heralded with a great deal of enthusiasm by all of the participants involved, until the administrators sent me numerous suggestions on how I should compose the work such as “...it should not have any dissonance...” “...not polyphonic...” “...use of Epirus Greek folk tunes...” “...very simple...” “...pops-like...” “...that everybody will understand and enjoy...” I replied outlining my view on the subject a month ago and received no further communication.

The other story is that last April, the Louisiana Sinfonietta, which I direct, presented a concert of music written by composers connected to Louisiana by birth, education, or residency. Two days later, the entertainment writer of the local newspaper gave a free lesson to all of our local serious composers on how they should compose using literal references to zydeco, blues, Cajun music, pops, and so forth. We were advised that to be considered as having any connection with Louisiana we had better use these sources as inspiration, otherwise our music has no place in the music scene of today, especially in our state.

Amid all of the above factors and trends, I cannot help but wonder where the personal voice of the composer is. What about his or her life, background, thoughts, personal messages, individuality? Is it imperative that the influences on the composer’s music come solely from either today’s commercial activities and materialistic society or the standard intellectual tendencies of the late 1950s? Is it not best for the composer to be left alone, free of pressures of the times, free to express his or her own personality, to use his individual language and way of thinking? All the great composers of the past have infused their music with their own distinctive voices. The audience have felt their greatness and have responded to their call. These individual voices created numerous directions in music, not the reverse.

Let us allow our contemporary composers the valuable right to freedom of personal expression, disregarding the various pressures mentioned above. When and if this happens the

21<sup>st</sup> century will be able to anticipated a rich and challenging production of serious music in the future.

#### **4. Composition in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Another View and my Hellenic Roots**

Blessed are the ones in music who discover at a very early age what they are destined to do throughout their lives. Mozart, I surmise, was one of them. The majority however, struggles to decide or accept what the future will bring to them. Searching for a profession is something which most individuals experience from childhood on. Should they pursue a career in law, medicine, business or math? These careers certainly look safer than the arts. Or perhaps they should start a small business as back-up security while they follow their strong inner voices and any wild dreams they may happen to have. In music, majoring in composition promises a vague future; hence the study of an instrument or acquisition of a degree in music education along with composition might supplement their ultimate desire to organize new sounds with some financial protection. After all, there is a possibility that their sounds will send messages to no one.

In addition, there is the option of a double profession (the Charles Ives Syndrome): making a living doing something else and using nights and weekends to work out their voices in the hope of artistic immortality. Somehow some of these available choices parallel professions other than the arts. Second and third chances are common nowadays as a long list of learning institutions and broad government support provide numerous possibilities. In the music profession in general, and composition in particular, there are two major areas where the artist may be accommodated: (1) academia, and (2) the free-lance career. The first choice offers more security; thus experimentations in making new sounds are more easily indulged, and musical talent lack of it is more difficult to distinguish. The audience is not desperately needed in the process, in contrast to the case of free-lance endeavors. Academia by nature expects tough and harsh stylistic approaches (which presumably fit the intelligentsia) such as ugly and incomprehensible sounds, sounds the public does not want to hear. If and when the academic composer needs some audience approval, changes might be adopted. He may desert, at least, momentarily, the harsh academic approach, leaving it for his students to carry on the torch while he himself searches for some public acceptance. In this case, usually if there is no talent to begin with, its lack is even more evident. The stylistic changes are rather drastic.

Unpleasant sounds are replaced by over-simplicity, absence of harmonic and rhythmic fluctuation, no counterpoint or coloring or existing material, and awkward motivic transformations. In short: monotonia — presumably easy music for the audience to enjoy.

Lately another recipe for composition has come to my attention: simultaneous double composing; one for academia, the other for the people. The first is as ugly as it can be and the other extremely simple and boring. A sensible compromise to justify the existence of an active composer!!! On the other hand, the free-lance composer has none of the above mentioned luxuries and so he tries to do his best in wooing public acceptance with more sincere means, method to which the composers of the past adhered.

It seems that all the above-mentioned gimmicks of the current academia have no historical basis. They are artificial in nature and probably products of our time. I do not believe the composers of the past thought anything like this. They just composed the way they felt with no stylistic compromises. They had a message and they gave it to us well as they could. The good ones survived; the other did not but at least they tried their best.

## 5. Resuets

Let us return to this natural and unpretentious approach to making music, honest music coming from our hearts, imprinted with our special personalities. The 21<sup>st</sup> century may need this return of individuality to produce again composers of the stature of Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Stravinsky, Bartok, and the like. During the recent composition concerts of the conference of the College Music Society, I experienced a wonderful feeling about the quality of the music I heard. It was apparent to me that the projection of personality is becoming little by little the force behind the creation of new works. I hope that this will prevail everywhere. I felt a hunger for free expression in our young up-and-coming composers.



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