

Pinocchio's Journey¹

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It does not take long in discussing teaching composition amongst composers before someone says "Yes, well, you can't really *teach* composition". There is an element to the composition of music which can't be spoken about until experienced (somewhat like the notion of thirst!) and simply telling someone about it will not help them experience it. Part of what I'm referring to is that spark, that fire which ignites the imagination and produces a consuming commitment to an idea. All that the teacher can do is to try to ensure an environment conducive to the development of certain attitudes to working, to listening, to experiencing and encourage the student to recognise that spark for themselves.

What then can be taught? One often hears the virtues of Species Counterpoint, Functional Harmony, Analysis of masterworks, etc. yet whilst it can be argued that this is essential for a well rounded musician, it is *not* composition! The mistake in this approach is that it ignores the fact that there is a relationship which inextricably binds what a composer is saying or trying to say and the tools, both intellectual and physical, with which he or she says it. If a composer is to move beyond the imitative he or she will need to grapple with this fact and start afresh to build new tools for the expression of *their* ideas.

In living, each person has to deal with what you would call the daily life. Do what you like, you cannot avoid the fact that we are all contemporaries. A great writer once said:

The fact remains that in the act of living, everyone has to live contemporarily. But in things concerning art and literature, they don't have to live contemporarily, because it doesn't make any difference; they live about forty years behind their time. And that is the real reason why artists are not recognised by their contemporaries.

He is expressing the time sense of his contemporaries, but no one is really interested. After the new generation has come, after the grandchildren, so to speak, then the opposition dies out: because after all there is a new contemporary expression to oppose.

That is really the fact about contemporariness. As I see the whole crowd of you, if there are any of you who

are going to express yourselves contemporarily, you will do something which most people won't want to look at. Most of you will be so busy living the contemporary life that it will be like the tired businessman: in the things of the mind you will want the things you know. And too, if you don't live contemporarily, you are a nuisance. That is why we live contemporarily. If a man goes along the street with horse and carriage in New York in the snow, that man is a nuisance; and he knows it so he doesn't do it. He would not be living, or acting, contemporarily: he would only be in the way, a drag.²

Both in their daily or expressive lives, no creative artist is ahead of their time. *No one* can live in the past in their daily lives, because it is gone; we can't live in the future because we don't know what it is. We can only live in the present in our daily life. We don't know where we are going but we know that we are on our way!

He spends his life in putting down this thing which he doesn't know is a contemporary thing. If he doesn't put down the contemporary thing, he isn't a great writer for he has to live in the past.... The minor poets of the period, or the precious poets of the period, are all people who are under the shadow of the past. A man who is making a revolution has to be contemporary. A minor person can live in the imagination. That tells the story pretty completely.³

Every composer has to find out what is the inner time-sense of his contemporaries. Although it cannot be taught directly, student composers need to be awakened to the fact that this is the primary search that they are undertaking. Although this search can be encouraged by a teacher, it ultimately has to be intuited and experienced.

I believe that one reason that the apprenticeship model of teaching composition is so favoured by teaching composers is not in order for a student to learn to write like their teacher but precisely because it allows the student to observe and partake in a living and working and thinking which is contemporary. Perhaps in past times it was a little easier because these activities were not as

¹ This paper was delivered at the conference's Education Forum and was preceded by the reading of the Pinocchio fairytale: (Collodi, Carlo: *Pinocchio* . as retold by Audrey Daly for Ladybird Books Ltd, Loughborough.)

² Stein, Gertrude: *How Writing is Written*. The Choate Literary Magazine, February 1935. Reprinted in *How Writing is Written*, Volume II of the Previously Uncollected writings of Gertrude Stein. Edited by Robert Bartlett Haas, Black Sparrow Press Los Angeles, 1974. pp 151-160.

³ *ibid*.

different from generation to generation as they are today. Even so, there will be today a sympathetic inertia, a sideband resonance, which will enable a student to apply these observed principles and practices to their own living and working and thinking.

When one is beginning to write he is always under the shadow of the thing that is just past. And that is the reason why the creative person always has the appearance of ugliness. There is this persistent drag of the habits that belong to you. And in struggling away from this thing there is always an ugliness. That is the other reason why the contemporary writer is always refused. It is the effort of escaping from the thing which is a drag upon you that is so strong that the result is an apparent ugliness; and the world always says of the new writer, "It is so ugly!" And they are right, because it *is* ugly. ...

You always have in your writing the resistance outside of you and inside of you, a shadow upon you, and the thing which you must express. In the beginning of your writing, this struggle is so tremendous that the result is ugly; ... although the struggle has much greater beauty. ... But the essence of that ugliness is the thing that will always make it beautiful. I myself think it is much more interesting when it seems ugly, because in it you see the element of the fight. The literature of one hundred years ago is perfectly easy to see, because the sediment of ugliness has settled down and you get the solemnity of its beauty. But to a person of my temperament, it is much more amusing when it has the vitality of the struggle.

As an example of what Gertrude Stein was referring to in that 1935 talk, I would like to dwell on one of the general differences between conception in the 19th century and the 20th century.

In the 19th century, thinking begins at one end and plans to come out at the other. They conceived of things as pieces put together to make a whole. 20th century thinking is much more of assembling the whole thing out of its parts. The 20th century conceived an automobile as a whole, so to speak and then created it, built it up out of its parts. The 19th century would have seen the parts, and worked towards the automobile through them.

In some respects composers are more like scientists than artisans or entertainers in that they try to understand and explain the universe and our place in it. They are different to scientists however in that they can apply their tools in a less rigorously logical and often more complex way than scientists allow themselves to under the guise of scientific method. It should be no surprise then to observe that 19th century composers used evolutionary techniques (such as the Exposition, Development, Recapitulation idea in Sonata structures), and these ideas are similar in form to

the evolutionary ideas expressed by Darwin. Even early in this century, Einstein, Gödel, Heisenberg, Lovelock, Mandelbrot & Lorenz, to name but some, have produced radically different models and more recently even the Darwinian model has undergone a major reconstruction.^{4,5}

The 20th century conception of the whole implies a sense of non-development, often of stasis, and this is the reason there is a sense of immediacy in much of 20th century music. Joseph Cambell suggests that if there is a single most important myth being developed in the 20th century it is that to do with the consciousness of wholeness, the containedness and limitations of the planet. There *is* a growing perception, a global perception of the wholeness of planet earth. Concepts of the global village (expressed in the ideas of world music) are 20th century concepts. By living contemporarily composers and other artists are a part of this perception; they help the collective imagination to open out into new forms.

What then are the implications of this for the study of Composition? We need to develop comprehensiveness (or what Buckminster Fuller called omnicomprehensivity) in our education system. At present we remain category bound, myopic and overspecialised. I believe we need to develop a three pronged approach:

Firstly, a **comparative ethnomusicological** study of music in society. This would involve current and past world musics (in lieu of what now is quaintly called Music History) and would enhance an understanding of the relationship of music to general culture on a global level, making it more appropriate to the age in which we live. Such an approach, emphasising the importance of process and context over product, would develop an understanding of and tolerance for a wide range of musical styles and techniques both within the composer's own culture and in others.

Whilst the study of 19th century hymn-tune harmony or even composition style studies - and I include in this the Second Viennese School and their successors (the western European "traditional" approach) - may be appropriate for a cultured understanding of the musics of certain western European cultures, it has little to do with Western musical composition today, or for that matter, an understanding of Tibetan ritual chant, or Peking Opera, or Gagaku, or African mbira or nose-flute music, or Indonesian gamelan music, or Indian raga, or all the immensely rich aboriginal musics and the list could go on ...

Secondly, a study of the physics and **psychophysics of music** as a basis for an

⁴Dawkins, Richard: *The Selfish Gene*. Penguin Books, 1976.

⁵Dawkins, Richard: *The Blind Watchmaker*. Penguin Books, 1988.

understanding of the materials of sound and the way in which they affect the body and mind. This is essential if we are to understand all the concepts of consonance and dissonance, tuning, spectral evolution (harmonicity, inharmonicity and pitch and their relation to timbre) - which itself impacts on the interrelationship between the instruments of music and the musical language, ... and the list could go on

The complicated interplay between the genetically determined machinery, together with the specific learning experiences of each individual, leads to the aesthetic outlook of that individual. Whilst at present there is little evidence to suggest that a more complete understanding of the rules of our internal processing of information will lead to a predictable scientific theory of aesthetic value, the extent to which artists are aware of that new knowledge, the neurophysiology, the biology and psychophysiology, is the extent to which they will have new approaches to heightening or accelerating aesthetic experiences.

Thirdly, the development of the digital computer as a composer's primary functional instrument. The role of the piano and its predecessors in the development of recent western musical thought is enormous. Today, there is a shift away from the piano as the composer's "work-horse", to the computer. I'm not suggesting that the piano is completely obsolete but that it is losing - has lost! - its role on the centre stage as the main vehicle, the main tool, that composers are using to work with on a daily basis.

Although the keyboard has proved to be an incredibly useful user interface to the sound world and will probably remain so for a while yet, the *piano* is no longer *the* focus of attention for young composers these days. Today, the composer's morning centering ritual is more likely to be the flick of a power switch followed by the "e-eeee-eee-e" of a hard boot followed by a quick game of Othello or even Loderunner - more often than not shared with a cup of strong black coffee to shake off the cobwebs of a late night "hack", than Hanon or Dohnanyi.

The working hours of programmers are like those of musicians - late afternoon to God-knows-when a.m. This is not too surprising considering that many programmers *are* musicians. Daytime, it is understood, is for administration. Nighttime, with fewer phone calls, longer cycles available on the big computers, is for concentration. The all-night brigade in the Terminal Garden may take breaks together and socialize, but the main event is focused work, and everyone up at that hour knows that and respects it.

Programming (or making music) at night is dreamtime, a period exclusively mental, utterly absorbing, sustained and timeless, placeless,

disembodied. "Electronic man has no physical body," proclaimed Marshall McLuhan presciently. A famed hacker and co-designer of the Macintosh computer named Andy Hertzfeld described the attractions of the programming state of consciousness in *Programmers at Work*:

It's the only job I can think of where I get to be both an engineer and an artist. There's an incredible, rigorous, technical element to it, which I like because you have to do very precise thinking. On the other hand, it has a wildly creative side where the boundaries of imagination are the only real limitation..."

The non-performing composer is a rare bird, historically. The computer allows the composer to make *sound*. Sound which can be just as easily complex or simple, at the click a button! Physical dexterity does not come into it. The Computer challenges the role of carbon based life-forms and their interface (i.e. the composer/performer relationship). A computer literate composer doesn't *have* to rely on others to perform their music for them to hear it. The computer as a generalised tool enables the drawing together of disparate ideas into a more wholistic thinking and music-making environment and thus appropriately reflects the needs and aspirations of the age: Where exploration is given more emphasis than overt emotionalism, discovery is emphasised more than reuse, conservation more than exploitation, and overridingly, less *dogma* more *sound*!

The business of an artist is to be exciting. If the work has its proper vitality and is centered in it's time, is alive, the result *must* be exciting.