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My Programmatic Music

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My Programmatic Music, Michael Mauldin, 2012

I wrote this as an e-mail answer to a question from Jennifer Garrett as she prepared her doctoral paper on my music.

My decision to put programmatic content/titles with my music came in the early 70's. I had been conditioned, like all young composers then, to see programmatic music as inferior to absolute music. I was told that many superficial, nineteenth-century works with programmatic titles would not hold the audience's attention without their programs. I saw some of those pieces. They were so poorly put together that I'd have quickly lost interest if I hadn't been listening for how the music advanced the program. When it didn't, I lost interest anyway. And the program didn't make the music any less shallow. I swore that I wouldn't write pieces that were a waste of the listener's time. To "use time well" became a goal, even though I love repetition (actually "recapitulation"—which fits with my "same but different" ethic).

I vowed that my music would be so well made that it would be attractive on first hearing, yet it would bear repetition well. I thought people would listen to it on its merit—that is, after they devoted their undivided attention to its first hearing, shutting out all other music and stimuli. After all, our professors and classmates listened intently whenever a new work was presented. They noticed details that showed they had really listened—to the first hearing. Wouldn't the public do the same?

But numbness from overstimulation had given way to "shock fests" by the avant-garde, which increased the intensity of a backlash among conservative listeners, who refused to take seriously any work by a living composer. All my life I've been caught in the middle, considered too simplistic by one side, too far-out by the other. It took a while to realize that being "in the middle" was a good place to be—not to gain converts from either side, but because the middle balance-point was often where my artistic-self wanted to be.

What convinced me to put programmatic information with what I felt was well-crafted music was not just that my naïve expectations about the audience were unrealistic. If that were the only reason, then I'd have been merely an opportunist, tricking listeners into paying attention. What convinced me was the performance of a piece by John Donald Robb, the former dean of the University of New Mexico School of Fine Arts, where I was working on a master's degree in composition.

Pianist Rita Angel performed Robb's "Scenes from a New Mexico Mountain Village." It was later orchestrated, but it was her performance of the original piano version that helped me realize that programmatic content could be an important plus. More than a trick to compensate for weak music, it could augment the listener's experience of an effective work.

If the painters in New Mexico could move people (perhaps even help them) with realistic landscapes that were luminous—even numinous—like the place itself, then perhaps it was not a sin for composers to be less abstract and absolute. Perhaps it was alright for them to unashamedly appeal to the positive aspects of the listener's human-ness, not just anger, fear or

disorientation. Those positive aspects need not automatically make the resulting music saccharine or shallow (even if the avant-garde reflexively dismisses it).

I set out to represent the essence of the land and its people in my music. Why not let the listener know what the inspiration for a piece was? Perhaps it would help him listen past the prejudice held by either side of the divide. Some might be surprised to find that they actually enjoyed the experience.