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Composing Music in the Twenty-First Century

By Michael Mauldin, 2017

In any time or place (regardless of trends or movements), good music (as well as good visual art, dance, or storytelling) holds the attention of the observer by using a balance of “same and different.” If what we write is too predictable, we lose the audience. If it’s too unpredictable, we lose the audience. Part of a composer’s prime directive (but his playful joy too) is to constantly search for a balance between same and different.

“Modern” composers and artists felt the need to “push the envelope” on the “different” side of the equation. They felt that the observer was too accustomed to previous innovations and would become bored (and “leave to make a sandwich,” as I tell my students). The resulting novelties were shocking to many, but often quite exciting (perhaps like Shakespeare’s novel use of language was in his day—and still in ours).

But, as with many types of progress, the belief that traditional approaches were exhausted and no longer effective led creators to make a wholesale swing to the “different” side of the style equation. Observers and listeners were left with little or no grounding or predictability (except that their equilibrium would be upset). So, they “left to make a sandwich.” Not from boredom, but from the lack of a discernable narrative.

The assumption that society is tired of anything depends on its successful transmission through generations. I’m reminded of the fragility of this when one of my young students is unaware of The Beatles—or Debussy. Overuse of anything can create an aversion to it. But so can unfamiliarity with it.

All our experience is a mixture of order and chaos, routine and surprise. Without the belief in the resolution of tendencies or tensions, they would have little meaningful effect (or affect) except disorientation and numbness. Perhaps part of the creative process is to “play” with the belief in resolution, satisfying it in part, or part of the time, but thwarting or delaying the resolution (or choosing to merely ‘dissipate’ the musical tension) at other times.

A quote from my AMERICAN MUSIC TEACHER article, “Where is Music Composition Going?” (August, 1992):

My own experience, and that of my students, tells me that those of us who compose do so for the sheer excitement of the joyful moments of magic that occur during the creative process, even though we also need the acceptance, recognition, and monetary reward. Balancing those needs with the hunger for regular doses of magic is a trick difficult to learn and even harder to teach. But to quit trying is to allow a mass-produced, non-idiosyncratic aesthetic to rule our lives and the lives of our children. To say that we must not “smooth off all the rough edges” does not endorse any particular style, since even the most experimental devices become predictable after much use.