

The Classical Beat

By Stephen Dankner

THE MUSIC OF THE FUTURE IS ALL AROUND US TODAY

I had lunch last week with my old friend Max Lifschitz at my favorite hangout, the Chef's Hat restaurant, up near the Vermont line on Route 7. Max and I were composer/students at the Juilliard School in New York in the late '60s-early '70s. He was in Williamstown, at Chapin Hall on the Williams College campus, to make a CD recording of Mexican composers' piano music (Max was born in Mexico.) I hadn't seen him in several years, so it was great to spend a few hours talking about what he's been doing.

Max is a busy man. Professor of Music at SUNY/Albany and based both in Albany and in New York City, he's followed a multiple career path of pianist, founder and conductor of the new music ensemble NorthSouth Consonance, while still remaining active as a composer. More than anyone I know, he has his finger on the pulse of new music today, so when I posed some probing questions to him about where things seem to be going, he had some very controversial opinions. Here's some of what he had to say.

"I started out focusing on Latin American music in the 1970s, when no one was interested in it. The composers were all unknown to the big-name composers and university professors in New York and on the East Coast. The days when Varese and Copland maintained a presence in Latin America in the 1930s and 1940s were long gone. During World War II, the State Department was concerned about keeping Latin America on this side of the Axis. Varese's 'Pan-American Union of Composers' and Copland's State Department-supported trips to Mexico and to Latin America were politically motivated, more than they were about making musical connections."

Composers are always, whatever they may say or profess to the contrary, interested in current trends: they want to see what the younger generations are doing, to see if they (the old fogies) are still "with it."

"We are now at the end of an era of 'uptown' domination" Max said. "The fear of Schoenberg and dissonance will eventually come to an end, because that style of music is not being widely written anymore. We live in a

postmodern era where anything goes. Young composers, even at the formerly high modernist ivory towers like Columbia and Princeton have been listening for years as kids to rock. They're not well versed in the so-called classical tradition. They grew up playing the guitar, not the piano. And they don't know the repertoire of classical music – Bach, Brahms, etc., or at best, they come to it late in their training, when it does them little good in honing their craft of composition. They write their music on the computer directly, so I've seen a lot of new music in C Major and in 4/4 (meter,) which is the default setting on most computer music programs.”

Has modernism in music come to an end, I asked? “Yes, it has. Society has never come to terms with it. It has no place in our postmodern, popular culture. When you play Schoenberg, Varese or Boulez, people don't understand it or like it.”

What about our training as composers at Juilliard, back in the 1970s, I asked him. Has it become passé? “1970s music is like 1970s engineering. It was useful then, but now it's obsolete. You wouldn't build a building today using forty-year old practices. It's the same in music. There weren't computers then to aid in design; now there are. Times – and the requirements of art – change. Young composers write music directly on the computer; they don't use score paper or notate music by hand.”

Most radically, Max's view of progressive musical growth was eye opening. “Take medical research,” he said. “Pharmaceutical companies spend more on drugs like Viagra than they do on cancer research. That's where the money is. The fact is, if it sells, it's good, not as in the old days, where if it was good, it sold. Now composers have a choice: to write a “Viagra”, mass-market piece, or to cater to the elite – as if music was research, like an advanced, experimental cancer drug. Institutions have changed, too. When I was a composition Fellow at Tanglewood, there were no popular artists performing there – it was only about the pure classical tradition. Pop musical culture compared to classical music is like Creationism to real, empirical science. Today, what you want to believe is more important than whether it's actually true.”

In spite of these dire observations, I found that Max was no Cassandra about the future of music. “I accept things as they are,” he said. “Though there used to be a ‘common-practice’ method of training, we live now in a state of blissful co-existence. Everything is all mixed together. Nothing really dies,

though. Gregorian chant was dormant for 800 years; now it's popular again, but for different reasons. Now composers write whatever they like – you can call it eclecticism, or use Alfred Schnittke's term 'poly-styleism,'" (meaning a mélange of different musics all at the same time.) Living in a celebrity culture, we can't avoid it, since 99 percent of everything we hear is recorded music. The past – of every stripe – is all around us."

As we parted, and I thought about the implications of Max's vision of musical reality, I felt surprisingly upbeat - heartened by his ideas. Everything old and new seems to exist in the present tense – the 'now' of Google, instant messaging, iChat and the wireless hot zones of our contemporary lives. Whether you feel this is progress or not, good or bad, music can, must and will reflect these 'wired' times; it can't help but be contemporary and an important part of the culture. Food for thought, don't you think?

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