

**Composer's Corner V:  
"The composer in exile"**

## **Abstract**

This article serves as the fifth installment in a six-part serial on the following topics: I: “The composer’s identity within the historical narrative,” II: “Crafting one’s voice,” III: “Horse or artist?,” IV: “A work in progress – *Concerto for bayan and orchestra*,” V: “The composer in exile,” and VI: “Aesthetics and accessibility in the 21<sup>st</sup>-Century.” In this issue, I will discuss issues raised as a result of writing and living in a foreign country. I discuss issues of culture shock, the Diaspora, self-identification, and other influences upon creativity as a result of living abroad.

## Introduction: How did I get here?

Of course, by the standard definition, living in exile implies that return to one's homeland is not optional, at least without great sacrifice. However, I believe that exile can simply result from a perceived pressure or incompatibility with one's homeland, however slight or surmountable. According to this definition, many composers, writers, and artists lived much of their lives in some form of exile. They arrived at these circumstances for a variety of reasons. Paul Gauguin moved to the south Pacific simply because he fell in love with the culture there and had grown tired of his own. Bela Bartok fled the Nazis, leaving his beloved homeland to spend the last few years of his life in New York. Ernest Hemingway spent many of his years abroad, restlessly unable to settle into a single place to call "home." In each of these examples, the effect upon their work was largely positive. Many of Gauguin's most well known works are portraits of Tahitian people created while he lived there. Some of Bartok's last few pieces composed in the U.S., including the *Viola Concerto* and *Concerto for Orchestra*, remain among his most beloved and often performed. Hemingway wrote the bulk of his novels while traveling between different countries. Certainly his experiences at the Italian front during WWI yielded one of his most treasured works, *A Farewell to Arms*.<sup>1</sup>

One of the most common questions I am asked by Thais is: "Why did you come here?" The short answer to this is simple: I was exiled by a depressed economy. After completing a terminal degree during one of the lowest employment trends in U.S. history, I was offered a job in Thailand (and a good one at that).

However, in addition to the practical compulsion to relocate, I was seduced by the prospect of experience. I have always believed that life should be rich with meaningful exposure to the abundant riches of the world. My desire for this is not intended to induce creativity; rather, it is a philosophical imperative. So, when offered the opportunity to join the faculty of Mahidol University College of Music, I accepted with gratitude.

In this sense, my own exile was both imposed and self-prescribed.

## Culture shock

Despite the rewards to an intrepid soul, living in a foreign culture can be extremely difficult. Normative behaviors seldom bear kinship to that of one's familiar patria, making communication at the market, at work, and (for some) in the home excruciating. In addition, the native people obtain comparable frustration in communication. Often the result for immigrants is to suffer from periodic bouts of acute loneliness combined with episodes of utter exasperation. We often find ourselves unable either to understand or communicate the most elemental needs.

In addition, the support network of family, friends, and colleagues one has stockpiled over the course of life is literally, in extreme cases, on the other side of the planet. Although certainly not constant, the episodes of isolation expatriates experience are indescribable and intense.

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, correlation does not equal causation. It is entirely possible that these artists would have contributed works of equal or greater "value," had they lived their entire lives in a single town, city, or nation. This article does not presuppose a scientific conclusions but seeks only to posit hypothesis.

Conlon Nancarrow, an American composer who lived most of his life in self-imposed exile in Mexico, was once asked if he felt it was "...an advantage [to his creative process] to have lived in isolation for so many years."<sup>2</sup> To this he responded: "I don't think of an advantage or disadvantage. It was just the way I worked."<sup>3</sup> To me, the question posed of Nancarrow seems naive. In my opinion, isolation, depression, and conflict do not foster creative output, although they may be characteristics that magnetize "creative personality" types.<sup>4</sup> In spite of this, I believe people are most productive when they feel loved and supported. I also feel that creativity is produced by a variety of circumstances and is different for different people. Some people thrive when locked in a prison cell, others need a city of constant noise and shuffle around them, yet others create best in extreme isolation in a natural environment. Edvard Grieg composed some of his most successful works at a summer home at the edge of a fjord, in the extreme remote of Norway (Ullensvang). Henry Cowell was imprisoned for 'immoral acts' (he was bisexual) and, during his four years behind bars composed prolifically. Gustav Mahler grew up in provincial Austria and only flourished in the hustle, bustle, and glitter of turn of the century Vienna.

I cannot speak for Nancarrow; however, if I were asked the same question I would offer that the opposite of isolation has been a huge advantage. I believe a composer should live a rich life, full of distinct experiences in order to create. By immersing oneself in a completely different tradition, parts of the internal self become apparent – at least to those who pay attention. This internal self is at the core of everything the artist creates<sup>5</sup> and is most readily apparent in interactions with people of a different background. The contrast can create a change of perspective on oneself, approaching objectivity.

## The pressures of identification

One of the pitfalls of this objectivity is the propensity to generalize, especially concerning the perceived differences between cultures. In fact, there is a fine line between sensitivity to other cultures and gross generalizations about the common traits within these cultures, which are sometimes viewed as ubiquitous. This tendency seems to be amplified within the Diaspora. It is quite possible that I have heard the

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<sup>2</sup> Furst-Heidtmann, Monika. "Interviews with Conlon Nancarrow (1980-1983)." Accessed 6 October 2014. <http://fuerst-heidtmann.de/html/nancarrow-interviews.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Here I am venturing into problematic ground. I have always been greatly offended by the notion of the "tortured artist," which seems not only absurd but induces very real and negative repercussions for young generations of self-identified artists. Anecdotal evidence can encourage this misguided notion – Van Gogh cut off his ear, Schumann lived in an asylum for his last five years, etc., *ad nauseum*. However, in my own life I have encountered numerous examples to the contrary. For instance, I have experienced a morass of mediocre art created by self-loathing flagellants and martyr complex stricken individuals. Simultaneously, my favorite living composers, poets, and painters are – for the most part – well-adjusted, essentially happy people. Essentially, anecdotal evidence is the strongest argument for this notion of the "tortured artist" and it simply doesn't suffice. That said, there may be a link between personality predispositions (genetic), associating self-identified "artists" and addicts or depressives. Although this does not guarantee the quality of art as a result of suffering, it might establish a correlation between people's genetic predispositions and their elected professions.

<sup>5</sup> I suppose it would be possible to amplify and investigate the internal self by other means. In fact, the restriction of senses or physical abilities (blindness, deafness, paraplegia, etc.) might produce a similar effect. But in most cases these are not things we choose, in the same way that calling a place "home" is an effort of free will.

word “they” – spoken from my expatriate colleagues in relation to the local norms – more often than in any other venue. In addition, the tendency to generalize is not limited to “the other” but is also applied to one’s own people.

As a result, self-identification – as a representative of one’s homeland – is subtly reinforced to a greater degree than in the actual homeland. It is strange but true that the distance induces a gravitational attraction. As we feel estranged from the familiar, we are compelled to cling to our individual notions of precisely what defines that familiar. When we associate with other individuals from similar backgrounds, we reinforce for each other precisely what it means to be \_\_\_\_\_ (read: American, Latvian, Polish, etc.). Ironically, the internal mechanisms that compel us to leave home in the first place make us outliers, as evidenced by the fact that a relatively small proportion of our own populations actually live abroad.<sup>6</sup>

These factors have a significant impact on creation. As one result of living abroad, I have been forced to re-conceptualize the issue of generalization because it is, in itself, understood differently in different parts of the world.<sup>7</sup> At the Seventh Annual Thailand International Composition Festival (Payap University, Chiang Mai), I was astonished to attend a panel discussion advocating *the necessity* of national identification (an acute form of self-inflicted generalization) in shaping one’s individual voice. This notion of the mandated application of either a “generalized sound” based upon cultural and national identity or nationalistic quotations struck me as bizarre.

As a result of this and other experiences, I have come to conclude that in Thailand and – judging from the perspectives of the Chinese, Japanese, Thai, and Malaysian panel mentioned above – perhaps in Asia generally, nationalism is now quite often viewed as a positive force in the creation of art. In fact, some of the leading regional voices in composition present in the panel felt *compelled* to include what they perceived as national characteristics in their own music.

In my own culture, assertions of nationalism in art usually recall the turn of the twentieth-century and are linked to dehumanization of “the other.” For Western ears nationalism in art is viewed as having inculcated individuation of culture, with WWI and WWII as the logical (read: teleological) result. This connection may be fallacious<sup>8</sup> but it is a standard form of reasoning based upon historical precedent. I sincerely hope that my ingrained prejudice against nationalism proves inaccurate, given the contemporary proliferation of this manner of thinking.

## Influence on my work

Almost certainly, the world I now inhabit has shaped not only my structural thinking (form, syntax, etc.) but also the fundamental elements of my music (pitch, rhythm, timbre, and every other surface-level facet). I am quite certain that my hearing of intervals, for instance, has changed as a result of living here for five years. In my work, *A Picture in Einstein’s hand* (2012), the intervallic relationships of the opening bear kinship to pentatonic scalar motion. I did not select this sound world intentionally to depict or derive quotation from something essentially Thai, for I was

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<sup>6</sup> At present, for example, the number of American citizens living abroad is estimated at about 2% and this is one of the highest epochs for this statistic in US history.

<sup>7</sup> Of course, this observation is also a generalization but not without evidence.

<sup>8</sup> Or not.

thinking in terms of the interval pairing of 2+3.<sup>9</sup> However, it is significant to me that I subconsciously placed such emphasis upon the only “stepwise” intervals found in the pentatonic mode. I have never been particularly attracted to this mode in the past. But I now spend my days surrounded by a musical culture that emphasizes precisely these intervals (within a different tuning system) and I intuit that this influenced me subtly as I improvised at the piano to create sketches for the piece.

However, some elements of my philosophy and, therefore, my music remain essentially personal. In spite of the milieu outlined in the previous section I do not feel that my music is expressly “American.” Of course, I am a U.S. citizen and, as a result of my cultural upbringing this fact is not specifically divorced from my music. I simply don’t believe that a generalized notion of what it means for music to be “American” exists.<sup>10</sup> And, I have not been compelled to shape my music in a way that will define it as such.

I believe one’s national boundary – whether native or foreign, former or present – does not define the person. Rather, it is the synthesis of all external and internal factors in one’s life (with national culture as one constituent) that creates each individual. In this sense, we are all composites of our own experiences. A composer’s job is to analyze and understand him/ herself and reconstitute the resultant observations in a meaningful way for the audience. An artist’s generative influence abounds when s/he both encourages this analysis and contributes to the constituent parts through meaningful life experiences. Living in exile aids in both endeavors.

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<sup>9</sup> If you do not understand what this means, you are not alone... Interval pairing involves the careful organization of horizontal interval relationships, whereby successive intervals are limited to only two possible interval classes. In a 2+3 pairing, for example, the pitch following C-natural may only be at the distance of a major second/ minor seventh or minor third/ major sixth, with octave equivalence (i.e. C-natural may be followed by any D-natural, B-flat, E-flat, or A-natural). The next pitch may also only be followed at the distance of a major second/ minor seventh or minor third/ major sixth, etc.

<sup>10</sup> If Elliott Carter, Aaron Copland, John Cage, and Steve Reich are all emblematic of “American music,” not to mention the countless other U.S.-born composers of the twentieth-century, then what does it mean to be an “American composer?” What are the common features to this extremely diverse group of artists.