

**Composer's Corner I:
The composer's identity within the historical narrative**

Abstract

This article serves as the first 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: “The composer in exile,” V: “A work in progress – *Concerto for bayan and orchestra*,” and VI: “Aesthetics and accessibility in the 21st-Century.” Before addressing such topics as “voice,” “accessibility,” etc. it is beneficial to pose questions relating the composer to his or contemporaneous world. For example, what is the task of the composer? What is his or her responsibility/ accountability and how does this contribute to society? To understand this it is also valuable to look into the past to see how this relationship has changed over time. Seemingly transparent, upon further reflection understanding the role of an artist, in any society, during any epoch presents challenges. This is due in part to the commoditization of art, the real or perceived threat to societal stability, and the association of mastery, relevancy, and profundity – in essence the value of an artist and his or her work – placed at the altar of the artist’s ego. These pressures have always exerted influence upon the creation of works, at times to the detriment, at others to the benefit of artificial (meaning human-created) beauty. In unpacking this narrative this article – and those, which will follow – intends briefly to introduce non-composer readers to the discipline of composition.

Introduction

This article serves as the first installment in a series introducing non-composer readers to the discipline of composition. These writings are not intended as thoroughly vetted, scholarly documents. Rather they contain the author's observations, reflecting common knowledge of the canon, hearsay of composer/ performer colleagues, and his generalized experience as an active composer for over a dozen years. Certainly, it is hoped that the reader will gain insight into the process of, cultural backdrop behind, motivations for, and challenges facing a composer today. However, at its core this group of works represents one person's opinion and should be understood thus. With this in mind, the author has planned 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: "The composer in exile," V: "A work in progress – *Concerto for bayan and orchestra*," and VI: "Aesthetics and accessibility in the 21st-Century."

The composer's identity within the historical narrative

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In the early years of Western Art Music – especially within the sacred tradition comprising virtually all of the early, notated music – composition was largely an anonymous art. Being a transitory art without potential for mass production, composers held little hope of disseminating works very far before the invention of the European printing press. In addition, many composers of monophonic plainchant (especially Gregorian chant which, owing to Charlemagne, largely condemned its precursors to oblivion within the historical narrative) were Catholic monks to whom it would hardly have occurred to affix appellations to their scores. Their creations were meant to inspire closer proximity to the God they worshipped and were produced (I like to imagine) without the incentive of ego praise and legacy inculcation but, rather out of a sense of servitude to something greater than themselves. A few names have survived with these works but we have identified most through processes of deduction, wherein scholars have managed to match non-musical writings, public personalities, and the context of composition with specific works to determine authorship. Of course there were also some composers in the sacred and secular traditions claiming their creations at the time. However, these remained exceptions to the rule.

As the tradition progressed into what is now known as the Medieval and Renaissance periods, the incursion of authorial ego began to take shape, developing between the 14th- and 16th-centuries into a list of the first “master composers,” such as Dufay, Des Prez, de Lassus, Palestrina, Gabrieli, Gesualdo, etc. Although these composers are also known for secular works, they were still linked to the churches and were not known only as composers but, more aptly, *as musicians* associated with specific chapels (*maestri di capella*). For most, their goals were probably still shaped by faith but, with the invention of the Gutenberg printing press in 1450, specific names began to circulate around Europe with the physical texts, which soon replaced oral tradition. As a result, the seeds of “the desire to be remembered” were probably planted in the late 15th-Century in Europe.

During the Baroque period and beyond, the aristocracy began directly to shape musical composition with increasing influence, as composers migrated from chapels to privately owned courts. The Baroque period may be viewed as a transition between these worlds with composers straddling the line. Beginning with the Classical period, Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven came to depend almost exclusively on private benefactors. Although Haydn took the safest route by working for one court for most of his career (Esterhazy), there was always the possibility of seeking other employment or even, as Mozart attempted, living autonomously from commission to commission. Thus the shift in employer class liberated aesthetics from dogmatic restriction to one subject, while simultaneously encouraging market value to influence production, thus restricting aesthetics in a different manner. Composers began to place higher priority on distinguishing themselves and, albeit subtly, focused less upon inspiring transcendence. This is, in my opinion, the first historically significant laudation of novelty and innovation within musical composition, with lasting repercussions.

The Romantic period saw another transition in composers’ revenue font from the courts to the universities, as education became available to increasingly larger (although still relatively marginal) segments of the general population. With an emergent middle class, and a slightly enlarged leisure class in “the West” the demand for university music teachers grew. Finally, as the 20th-Century unfolded into the so-called Modern and Postmodern periods, the private patron disappeared virtually altogether, as had the church before him. Curiously, the composer remained married to novelty without the patron class that had unwittingly encouraged this preoccupation. In place of the benefactor, the quasi-scientific pursuit of knowledge (best embodied by Milton Babbitt’s infamous “Who cares if they listen”¹) encouraged innovation in a generation progressively disassociated from its audience and increasingly constrained to halls of learning. Without an audience, the market (which, in fact, underlies the entire narrative) turned its back on the composer. Eventually the universities, which had linked the art form to a quasi-scientific endeavor, also began to undervalue musical composition due to its lack of marketability, leading us to the present historical moment.

The composer today

All of this presents acute challenges and uncertainties for contemporary composers. Today’s composer is equipped with a compass confounded by too many vague

¹ It is, of course, worth noting that this article title was not the composer’s but, rather the editors choice...

magnetisms, each a relic of the past – the church, the benefactor, the university – and each evincing no tangible reward for the direction chosen. Sadly, no alternative has surfaced apart from the traditional (presently absent) mechanisms that had supported composers over the centuries. Like phantom limbs these institutions still elicit composers to feel and react, despite their severance.

Unfortunately, for many composers the solution to this quandary is to cling desperately to an expired model, to ignore transcendent profundity in favor of “musical progress.” However, unlike Beethoven who lived at a time when progress did not need to extend far beyond the emotionally meaningful (or, at least inspiring) origins of the tradition, *progress today has virtually come to mean abandonment of meaning altogether*. Further distance is created from the audience and comprehension is left to the elite specialist instead of as an experience of life for the listener.

I have been very fortunate to participate in masterclasses with some fantastic composers, as well as to oversee a few of my own. I wish I could say that the younger generation is enlightened in this regard but I have encountered in many a desire to create profound, intellectually derived and constructed works with little or no sublimity. Recently a group of finalists at an international competition responded to the question: why do you compose? Disconcertingly, this elite group of young composers offered only vague responses. I fear that *they had not considered the question, at least not for some time if ever before*. In the most concrete answers, I sensed ego gratification as motivation, with responses like “I write music for myself” and “I don’t care about the audience, other composers, etc.” These answers are self-serving, for they intend for us to conclude that the respondent is a “true artist.” Yet, however ego gratifying, these answers are extremely shallow considering their implications (if not disingenuous).

This leads us back to the question posed at the outset, what could the task of the composer be, given this history and the current state of affairs? What is his or her responsibility/ accountability and how does this contribute to society? The composer has been seemingly abandoned and it appears as if very few are listening. Some gifted composers I know have begun to proffer a different question: why compose at all?

For me, the answer for these questions is simple. I compose because I want to *inspire something within you*. That which I compose cannot be expressed in words. It can only be voiced in abstract, artificially controlled sound. I cannot predict what it is I hope to inspire – whether emotion, thought, or action. I believe that my music might help to make the world a better place. If I didn’t believe that, I would find another path. I believe the task of the composer, as with all creators of art, is to pay attention to the world around and reflect that world back to anyone listening, looking, paying attention. Of course I don’t believe that I can reach all of you but if I can I wish to influence both the heart and mind of anyone who will take the time to listen.