

## Dr. James Ogburn: Composition Philosophy

In my music I attempt to reach the largest audience possible, as well as to create something new and unique. In response to the 1958 editors of *High Fidelity*, I care if you listen but I also see myself as a specialist. To achieve my dual goal, I try to balance the needs of both my intellect and emotions to appeal to both aspects of the imagined listener's consciousness. Luckily, I live at a time when both characteristics are valued in music.

Contemporary Art Music of the Post-Modern (or, if you prefer, Post-Post-Modern) Period encompasses such a wide range of styles and influences that the available palette for composers seems limitless. The Schoenberg-led, 'Copernican' revolution at the turn of the Twentieth-Century initially encouraged a repressive atmosphere in composition – culminating in the post-war Darmstadt school's hegemonic sphere of influence, dominated by constructivist ideals. True, these attitudes still exist in some factions today. However Cage and, later, the minimalists asserted a counter-revolution, which insisted on the liberation of art from conformance to codified structures.

In the aftermath of these extremes of aesthetic, Contemporary Art Music has been re-constructed to include virtually every tonality imaginable, blurred distinctions from folk genres of all parts of the world, and every sound, whether from nature or manufactured. In addition to attitudinal shifts, the existential milieu has transformed dramatically, offering countless possibilities for musical exploration. The technological advances of the past century offer access to previously unimaginable synthetic sounds, as well as for the collection and manipulation of found objects. Interactions between far-flung members of the global community are easier than at any time before, offering unprecedented potential for inter-cultural contact, communication, and inspiration. These dramatic circumstantial and perceptual changes have provided today's composers the greatest artistic freedom of any period in Western history.

For the most part, this is an absolute blessing. However, at times I have found myself confronted by a blank page and the lack of limitation proves more daunting and restrictive than any imagined set of rules or normative procedures ever could. Therefore, I often build my works around self-induced limitations loosely based upon the systematic approaches of my compositional predecessors. As Stravinsky said during the 1939-40 Harvard lectures, "The more constraints one imposes, the more one frees one's self... the arbitrariness of the constraint serves only to obtain precision of execution." By creating and imposing pre-compositional models for each piece, I am left free to explore the world of each through improvisation and developmental variation. For example, in the opening of a recent string quartet, I applied serial order to the harmonic layer, which corresponded to the serial order of the rhythmic structure of the melody. Then, by applying a variety of timbres unsystematically, as well as a melodic layer that operates independently, according to improvised material with loosely controlled interval successions, I was able to develop my idea thoroughly, within the confines of a systematic approach that is (within my oeuvre) unique to that piece.

As I see it, music is fundamentally built upon expectations in the listener's subconscious. In the absence of the codified and predictable tonal structure, it is my job to construct expectations in the listener, and then subvert these expectations so that the narrative flow of the piece continually engages the attention. Although I agree with Stravinsky in the belief that restrictions are "arbitrary," I disagree about the desire for "precision of execution." Wherever I feel compelled to engage the listener in certain ways, I "break the rules" simply to achieve the most satisfying sound. In addition, after establishing specific and foreseeable relationships, I create surprising and contrasting events. Of course, the initial task of constructing expectations within a single work without relying on recognizable or consistent systems is extremely difficult. However, I believe contrast achieved in this way is absolutely necessary to the narrative flow of music, wherever it seeks both to innovate and to engage the listener's active attention.