

“An Era of Eclecticism” – Sunny Knable

The following is a lecture given at Texas A&M University Corpus Christi as part of the Islander Music Festival in September, 2018. It is geared towards young musicians who have the love of music enough to start a music degree but perhaps not the context to appreciate the place their music study occupies in history. This is what I wish I had known when I was 18 years old.

Introduction

Today, I'll be talking to you about the state of contemporary art music in the 21st Century, a lecture I'm calling, “An Era of Eclecticism.” Instead of starting with a longwinded introduction about what that means, I thought I'd play you an excerpt of a piece which I fell in love when I was about your age. It's by the famous composer, conductor and pianist Leonard Bernstein. Some of you might know his music from the Broadway musicals *On the Town*, *West Side Story* or *Candide*, and still others might have seen his program, “Young Person Concerts” which he performed with the New York Philharmonic for many years. Many people don't know that he was also a “serious” classical composer of art music as well – including 3 symphonies, 2 operas, many art songs, pieces for small chamber groups, piano solos and more. The excerpt I'd like to play is from his Second Symphony, which is really a kind of piano concerto, subtitled “The Age of Anxiety” on the poem of the same name by W.H. Auden. Here's part of the second movement called, “The Masque.” [PLAY]

“Serious” vs. “Popular”

If you didn't know the piece already, I doubt you imagined anything sounding quite like jazz piano when I told you this was “serious” art music. What makes that piece “serious” and let's say, the music of Stevie Wonder or Frank Ocean “popular”? Those musicians are serious about their craft and use similar chords at the piano, influenced by jazz harmony. Any thoughts? It's a hard thing to define. Mainly it has to do with the fact that this is music composed for a traditional classical ensemble to be performed in a concert hall. In Bernstein's time, this piece was not universally accepted by the classical world. After World War II, classical composers were going through a crisis of identity – there were different camps of composition and all of them felt like they were the only correct one. Many “serious” composers did not accept music which sounded like jazz into the concert hall. The main reason I start with Bernstein in this discussion is not only because he was one of my heroes growing up in a musical family who listened to classical, jazz and popular music all with the same enthusiasm, but also because of his musical predictions about the future in which we now find ourselves.

Bernstein's "Unanswered Questions"

In 1976, Bernstein was invited to give what are called the Norton Lectures at Harvard University, his alma mater. These are a series of six lectures in which he explores the fundamental questions of why music exists, plotting the history of Western classical music from its primordial derivation of a child forming the word "Ma", through the progression of organized sound from the Greeks to the 20th Century. I encourage you all to watch these lectures online or check out the published manuscript from your music library – these are an invaluable set of words. The title of his series was called "The Unanswered Question" from the title of an orchestral piece by American composer Charles Ives. This unanswered question is a phrase which Bernstein uses as the poetic inspiration for the entire lecture series. At the very end of the last lecture, he says the following words which have stayed with me since I was a teenager:

"I believe that a great new era of eclecticism is at hand – eclecticism in the highest sense – and I believe that it has been made possible by the rediscovery, the reacceptance of tonality, that universal earth out of which such diversity can spring." I know it might sound overly simplified, but these words have held true for the last half century and are even stronger now than ever. That was very prescient for an artist who wrote that the 1970's and died in 1990. So, what does he mean? In order to know what he's referring to about the "reacceptance of tonality," you have to know that at one point, tonality was considered passé. By the end of the 19th Century, the major/minor system of tonality that we know from Bach, Beethoven and Brahms had been bent to a point of near breaking. Composers like Debussy, Wagner, Mahler and Richard Strauss were pushing the limit of tonality so far that composers were inevitably heading off the proverbial cliff.

20th Century

By the time that the 20th Century began, many composers were wondering out loud, "now what?" Some were composing Romantic sounding music and others were experimenting with new sounds which mined folk music (like Dvorak), others were exploring tonalities from foreign cultures (like Debussy), and still others were inventing their own systems (like Schönberg). In America, Charles Ives, the composer of *The Unanswered Question* was mashing together such different simultaneous sounds as a marching band, church hymns and the sound effects of machinery. By the time World War I began, there were emerging from the ashes two figures who would change everything. When the smoke finally cleared, it was clear that in order to be considered a serious classical composer in the 20th Century, you had two paths to choose between from the two great giants of composition: Stravinsky or Schönberg.

Stravinsky vs. Schönberg

Instead of using words to describe them, let's just listen to some excerpts from the quintessential pieces of both composers. Here is a sample of the German composer Arnold Schönberg's *Verklärte Nacht* (*Transfigured Night*) written in 1899 – you'll probably notice just how Romantic his writing is here. [PLAY] Only 12 years later, here is the beginning of his chamber piece, *Pierrot Lunaire*, written in 1912, featuring a vocalist who performs in *Sprechstimme* (speak-singing). [PLAY] Can you hear a difference? The breakdown of tonality is shocking, so much so that Schönberg went into a hibernation from composing for 5 years in order to organize his thoughts about this new type of music he called pantonality – this would eventually turn into his 12-tone system of generating and organizing his music. Musicologists call this period of his Expressionism.

In contrast to Schönberg, let us listen to Russian composer Igor Stravinsky. Here is a short clip of the ballet which rocketed him to stardom: *The Firebird*, written for Diaghalev of the Ballet Russes in 1909. You'll notice its tunefulness which draws from Russian folk song. [PLAY]. Just four years later, he wrote a piece which turned the classical world on its head, called *The Rite of Spring*, a ballet in which the main dancer dances herself to death in a primal ritual. You might have even heard the story that at the premiere in Paris in 1913, there was such a violent reaction from the audience members, that a riot broke out. [PLAY] Can you hear a difference between those two styles? That transformation is shocking as well. Musicologists call this period of Stravinsky's Primitivism.

Am I moving too quickly? Yes! All of this material, you will cover in a music history sequence someday if you are to continue your studies in music. This is just to lay the groundwork for an understanding of music in the 20th Century that you need to know in order to follow the story to the present day: that there were two main paths to choose from. On one path, you had Stravinsky who was constantly changing styles, but always drawing from tonal traditions in one way or another. On the other path, you had Schönberg who had developed a mathematical way of organizing his chromaticism, and who purposefully avoided references to the past traditions. Both camps had followers, and both camps thought they were the only right path.

WWII and Onwards

This brings us up to the general state of composition until about World War II. Just as 9/11 now marks a shift in the way the world thinks differently about its political landscape, the end of WWII marked the end of a lot of old ways of doing business. In general, there was a need to explore new ideas and make new definitions. There was no shortage of either. In Austria, Schönberg taught two pupils who would comprise the so-called Second Viennese School, comprised of Anton Webern and Alban Berg. Essentially, these two men represent two different ways of interpreting the system which Schönberg had developed. Webern composed in a pointalistic, miniature and perfectionistic model of the 12-tone method; in fact, his works are so short that all of them can be fit on a double-album. Here's the opening of his *Fünf Orchesterstücke* [PLAY] Berg on the other hand interpreted his master's system in a way that drew on traditions from the past; he composed 12-tone rows which had tonal implications, writing grand works like a violin concerto and 2 operas. Here's the opening of his Violin Concerto. [PLAY] Essentially, these two men would present a splinter in the so-called Serialists who followed: those who followed strictly and those who composed with references to tonality. The lineage of both camps can be drawn all the way to the music of today.

American School

While those boundaries were being drawn in Europe, America was coming up with its own new ideas. Suddenly there were composers interested in drawing from the Americana music of folk, blues and jazz idioms. Those include many of my heroes, including George Gershwin, Aaron Copland, Ned Rorem, Samuel Barber and Leonard Bernstein. Some of you might have heard Copland's *Rodeo* for example, which has been featured in movies, television and commercials and conjures up an iconic American theme. Here's the beginning of a movement called "Hoe-down." [PLAY]. All of these composers went through a jazz and blues period, but none of them settled on the style for good, except for the composer George Gershwin who came from a musical theatre and jazz background and entered into the classical world late in his short life. You might recognize his tune "I Got Rhythm" for example [PLAY]. He uses a similar language in his first quasi-classical piece "Rhapsody in Blue". [PLAY]

The Ivory Tower

At the same time that the Americana School of composers was expressing itself in the concert hall, an important development began which continues on today: serious art music of mainly European descent was being adopted into the Ivory Towers of America. That included all of the Ivy League Schools like Columbia, Princeton, Yale and Harvard, whose students churched out serialistic pieces for many decades to come, including my own father who wrote 12-tone music in the 1970's.

Tape Music

While Ivory Towers of composition were being erected, another new idea was being explored thanks to Bell Laboratories during World War II: the world's very first synthesizer, which became a project of Columbia and Princeton in the 1950's. Composers like Milton Babbitt and Edgar Varèse were gathering for many hours to work with the new-fangled machine, coming up with the first synthesized art music of the world, recording it onto reel to reel tape and splicing pieces together in any number of ways. Here's a sample of Babbitt's *Philomel*. [PLAY].

Musique Concrète

In the 1980's and '90's, those same techniques were recreated on the computers of the day. Composers were experimenting with electroacoustic music – combining elements of synthesized music and live performance. Both tape music and computer music were used to record and reorganize sounds from the real world as well – this style of music was called *musique concrète*. Here's a sample of the first *concrete* piece by Pierre Henry and Pierre Shaffer called *Symphonie pour un homme seul*. [PLAY]

Minimalism

Just as Schönberg's system was a reaction against tonality, there was another movement in the 1970's which still impacts today, that was a reaction against all of the Ivory Tower education. Many composers who went through those schools eventually rejected the serialist training and came up with their own solutions. One such composer was Philip Glass – and here is one of his quintessential, trance-like pieces, *Music in Similar Motion*. At the same time, you had composers Steve Reich and John Adams in a similar camp. Here's a sample of one of my favorite works of all time, Adams' *Harmonielehre*, which shows how interesting the repetition of minimalism can be in the hands of a master of orchestration. [PLAY]

Neo-Minimalism

Music like that led in turn to a next generation of minimalists. Composer Martin Bresnick taught at Yale the composers David Lang, Julia Wolf and Michael Gordon, all of whom banded together to create a group called Bang On a Can, which is also the name of a festival of new music which is still going every year in New York City, and which celebrates Neo-minimalism. Here is the Godfather to those three composers, Bresnick and his piano piece, *Willie's Way*. [PLAY]

Spectralism

While the Minimalism movement was being formed and evolving, so too was another camp out of France, called Spectralism, led by composer Gérard Grisey, and his followers Tristan Murail and Goerg Frederich Haas. This type of music is based on the idea of the sound itself and the mathematical properties of sound being the basis of music composition. Here's one of the first of its kind, Grisey's *Partials*. [PLAY]

The Class of 1938

Then there are the individuals who don't fit easily into one category or another. Interestingly, there is a cluster of composers all born in 1938 who were raised in that Post-WWII environment, and who all searched for a different solution than the paths of Stravinsky or Schönberg. They are also some of my biggest heroes today: William Bolcom, John Corigliano, John Harbison, Frederick Rzewski, Joan Tower, and Charles Wuorinen. Bill Bolcom writes music that at times sounds a lot like the music of Scott Joplin. [PLAY] Corigliano writes tuneful music inspired by the concert traditions and has also written music for the films, "Altered States" and "The Red Violin" which I highly recommend watching. [PLAY]. Harbison is influenced by serialism and by jazz at the same time. [PLAY]. Rzewski, one of my own all-time biggest heroes, writes music from the perspective of a performer, often writing virtuosic piano music influenced by political themes. [PLAY] Tower is one of the first women composers in the 20th Century to make a big reputation who has paved the way for many women composers after her. [PLAY]. Wuorinen is influenced by serialism as well. [PLAY] These are the figures who served as models for me at the end of the 20th Century, and you'll notice that they write in an incredibly eclectic mix of styles.

An Era of Eclecticism

That brings us to the main point: the state of composition today. For anyone who attended the concert last night, you will have heard four different composers who have a lot in common and yet represent totally different branches on the tree of composition. While all of the pieces were for bassoon, they offered totally different methods of generating and organizing music. Alec Wilder is the result of the Eastman School of Music, and composed music reminiscent of German composer Paul Hindemith, who operated in a kind of neoclassicism and generated music based on 4th's and 5th's. Miguel del Aguila is a very successful composer from Uruguay who embraces his Latin American roots, and composes music based on folk traditions, mixed with jazz harmony and modern techniques. You are extremely lucky to have him in attendance at this festival, so make sure to see the concert on Saturday night as well. Libby Larsen could be categorized under the Americana School of composition, reminiscent of Copland's use of jazz idioms in a classical forum. Then there's this Knable fellow. I count myself as a postmodern composer, which means I draw influence from all of the above. The three-movement piece *The Busking Bassoonist*, which you might have heard last night, is based on the form of the Blues, the Jazz Ballad and form called Rhythm Changes (based on the "I Got Rhythm" song you heard earlier). This approach to form is inspired by the Americana School of composers – Gershwin, Copland, and Bernstein. However, my language is organized using serialistic techniques inspired by the Second Viennese School – comprised of Schönberg, Webern and especially Berg. I am using "extended techniques" that have been explored by many different camps, including the music of Stravinsky and his followers. If I had to choose one "school of music" to belong to, I suppose it would be the Berg School of Music – a composer who was influenced by serialism but who composed with the traditions of the past and his own culture in mind.

Schools of Music

As you can see, the state of composition today in America is no one thing. And it never really was. The two main paths of the early 20th Century have splintered into hundreds of paths or more; sometimes a path can be narrowed down to a single composer and their method of composition. In today's world of composition, universities are now the protectors of various schools of thought. The Ivory Towers still exist though each one is guarding a different mantel. Currently, Columbia guards the Spectralist tradition. Harvard, the serialists. Juilliard, the American School. Princeton, computer music and music influenced by popular forms. Yale, the neo-minimalists. Am I generalizing? Yes! There is room for much subtlety and debate in what I'm saying, but those trends do exist right now in those schools. Then there are the schools which embrace many forms of composition: USC, Michigan University, and Stony Brook University. When you include other countries into the discussion, you will find even more variety than I have laid out here today.

Summary – 100 Years Ago

100 years ago exactly, Stravinsky was composing his Neoclassical work *L'histoire du soldat* (*Soldier's Tale*) based on the sounds of war bands and jazz ensembles. [PLAY] At the same time, Schoenberg was busy coming up with a system of composing music we now call the "12-tone method", resulting in his first work of this kind, *Fünf Klavierstücke*. [PLAY] And to put things in perspective, this is also the year that Bernstein was born, 1918. Now 100 years later, we are left with the remnants of those two giants whose paths have splintered into many different solutions to the same question: "what now?" Every composer must wrestle with that question. Many of us start by imitating the masters that we love and work our way towards finding our own voice. Some will search for that voice their whole life and never settle on a single solution. Others will find a voice and stay with it their whole life, perhaps evolving.

Even the two great masters I keep referring to, Stravinsky and Schönberg, changed their styles and their methods. Perhaps, in order to find a solution to the problem of composition today, we should look to those masters again. Strangely, both men had a long a winding rode through different countries but eventually both resettled in Beverly Hills, California. It is even rumored they saw each other at the same grocery store and purposefully avoided talking to each other. Later, when Schönberg had died, Stravinsky finally began composing 12-tone music. It is a sweet turn of events that only after Schönberg's death was Stravinsky able to relent and try composing using his 12-tone method. Here's a piece that uses the 12-tone method but composed by Stravinsky. [PLAY]

Conclusion

If you are a young performer, theorist, musicologist, or composer today, you might be overwhelmed by the variety of styles and amount of music to sift through. There are times in which I wake up and I am depressed at the state of music today, only because it seems like the popular culture of America does not respect what we do. But if you look more closely, and if you look farther out, you'll find that music is being made everywhere and by every type of person there is. It is no longer a world just for privileged, straight, white, English-speaking, Christian men – it is for people of all races, sexes, preferences, religions and backgrounds. And it is being disseminated worldwide in the blink of an eye with the technology of today. Yes, it is difficult to become rich and famous as a classical musician – but is that why you are in music? Even those who achieve stardom, only keep it for a short time, and are forced to repeat themselves ad nauseum. But if you are a true artist, you are constantly searching, searching for answers to burning questions within you – you are searching for nourishment. And what better place to forage than in the eclectic offerings of today. What a great time it is to be alive.

The question that I keep asking you to ponder is, “what now?” And I think you know the answer already, because you were born in the 21st Century. “What now?” ... Everything.