

Composition Considerations

by Ed Wolfe (in preparation for a "meet the composer" Q&A session on September 7th, 2008, in Temecula)

- Introduction, background and distribution of materials:

- 1) Education and background
- 2) Teaching Career
- 3) Early Compositions

- Richard Strauss and other influences:

- 1) Strauss on being "modern"- a paraphrase: "Modern?...Have ideas like Beethoven, be a craftsman and as prolific as Bach, orchestrate with the effectiveness, simplicity and grace of Mozart, and be a true example and representative of your own times....then you will be modern!"

- 2) Strauss on his compositions:

"I may not be a first-rate composer, but I am a first-class second-rate composer!"

- 3) Arturo Toscanini on Richard Strauss:

"To Strauss the composer I take off my hat; to Strauss the man I put it back on again."

- The 20th century composers: (Bartok, Hindemith, Stravinsky, Hovhaness, Copland, Honegger, Barber and Britten)

Bartok (1881-1945)-Nearly 2,000 folk tunes from mostly Hungary and Rumania; five books and numerous articles; was a virtuoso pianist; 153 piano pieces in six books of graded difficulty and finally will be an enduring force in music of the 20th Century. Two of my favorite works: Concerto for Orchestra and the Violin Concerto both of which I have enjoyed performing.

Hindemith (1895-1963)-A practical musician who plunged immediately into contemporary music with no visit to Romanticism or Impressionism first (unlike Bartok and Stravinsky); an accomplished violinist and violist (as well as many other instruments); wrote many Song Cycles, much Chamber Music; four String Quartets; Mathis der Mahler; Symphony in Eb; Symphony for Concert Band. One of my favorite Hindemith works is the Sonata for Bassoon, Trumpet and Piano, which I performed on my senior recital. His musical philosophy is set in his work A Composer's World and highlights four areas: Communication, Craftsmanship, Tonality and Symbolism.

Stravinsky (1882-1971)-Somewhat of a revolutionary, he is often thought of as "the most original and influential composer of the Twentieth Century." He studied with Rimsky Korsakov in St. Petersburg from 1905-1908. Among his most performed works are Petrushka, The Rite of Spring, The Firebird, Symphony of Psalms, Agon and The Rake's Progress. Among his most famous quotes on music is: "Music is given to us specifically to make order of things, to move from anarchic, individualistic state to a regulated, perfectly conscious one, which alone insures vitality and durability." He was often considered to have a Neoclassical phase and later a neo-Gothic phase in his chamber music. Of the rudiments of music, rhythm was paramount in his music and a rhythmic

study of his works demonstrate a real element of unity in the very prolific span of musical composition during his lifetime. The use of shifting meters and misplaced accents are but two examples of a very intricate treatment of rhythm in most of his work. Also, the use of interchangeable major/minor parallel keys and the modes (notably dorian) are extensive throughout his works. It is through self-imposed limitations and constraints, that Stravinsky found his “freedom” to create. “Whatever diminishes constraint diminishes strength. The more constraints one imposes, the more one frees oneself of the chains that shackle the spirit.”

Hovhannes (1911-2000)-An early developer and fusion of “East-West” music decades before the term “World Music” had been coined, he most often returned to “archaic” models of composition totally rejecting the Twentieth Century schools of Americana, serialism and atonality. Largely overlooked because of his “aloof” attitude towards the musical establishment, he was considered a predecessor to the Spiritual Minimalists of the 1960’s and 1970’s. His works are often thought of as “mystical, visionary and even intoxicating”.

Copland (1900-1990)-An accomplished pianist, he is best known as a composer of Americana. His Nationalism is shown to one extent or another in almost every major work quoting folk songs, hymns, and “scenes” of America’s culture. Among his well known works are El Salon Mexico, Billy the Kid, Quiet City, Fanfare for the Common Man, Lincoln Portrait, Rodeo, Appalachian Spring, and The Red Pony (most of which I have been fortunate enough to perform). Stravinsky was his model, but Faure was his favorite composer and (since one of his teachers was the great Nadia Boulanger) he greatly admired the French Impressionists and in particular, the members of Les Six (Georges Auric, Louis Durey, Arthur Honegger, Darius Milhaud, Francis Poulenc and Germaine Telleferre). They were widely seen as reactionaries against Wagnerism and Impressionism, although they were closely tied to them. Copland was famous for “open” harmony, percussive orchestrations, changing meter, polyrhythms, polychords and even tone rows at times. He died of Alzheimer’s Disease at the age of 90.

Honegger (1892-1955)-A member of Les Six, he was considered one of the prominent avant-gardists of the Twentieth Century utilizing bold rhythms, sometimes “violent energy”, bold colors and sharply dissonant harmonies. Much of his work is programmatic in nature and he made extensive use of short, striking melodies and strong ostinato rhythms. Among his more prominent works are Jeanne d’ Arc au Bucher (Joan of Arc at the stake), King David, five symphonies, Pacific 231, Horace Victorious and the Concertino for Piano and Orchestra.

Barber (1910-1981)-There is much more to Barber’s music than Adagio for Strings (originally a movement from a string quartet). He was the composer of orchestral, opera, choral and piano music as well. He was a child prodigy and entered the Curtis Institute at the age of 14. He apologized to his mother in a letter (at the age of nine) that he wanted to be a composer and not an athlete (a great worry of his). Among his more interesting works are Music for a Scene from Shelley (based on “Prometheus Unbound”), The School for Scandal, Symphony in One Movement, The Violin Concerto and of course the

very beautiful Adagio for Strings. His compositions made use of techniques including polytonality, atonality, twelve-tone technique, and even occasionally some Jazz. Also used in some music was a re-visiting of Neoclassicism.

Britten (1913-1976)-A conductor, violist and pianist, wrote many works for the stage including Paul Bunyon, Agamemnon, Peter Grimes, The Rape of Lucretia, The Beggar's Opera (after John Gay), The Little Sweep and Billy Budd to mention but a few. He also wrote many choral works (many liturgical and some based on famous poetry), numerous solo songs and music for the radio. Among his orchestral works are Sinfonetta for Chamber Orchestra, Simple Symphony for Strings, A Piano Concerto, A Violin Concerto, An American Overture, A Cello Symphony (for his friend Rastropovich), Several String Quartets, Fanfare for St. Edmundsbury (which I have performed), three suites and numerous works for film. One of his best known works, A Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra (made to be an educational film in 1946) has a spoken narrative which is often omitted during concert performances. Perhaps his most daring piece is the War Requiem for soprano, tenor, baritone, chorus, orchestra, chamber orchestra, boy's choir and organ (and we perform this where?! His main influences were Stravinsky and Mahler, an interesting coupling.

- Contemporary Composers:- Check out their sites and music.

Alex Shapiro-Friday Harbor, WA., www.alexshapiro.org. A very talented composer, lecturer and article author who is becoming quite well known throughout the country and the world.

Mark Zuckerman-Roosevelt, NJ., www.mazicmusic.com. A Rutgers visiting Professor of Music studied with David Epstein, Elie Yardin, Milton Babbitt, J.K. Randall and Peter Westergaard on the way to his PHD. from Princeton.

Greg Bartholomew-Seattle, WA., www.gregbartholomew.com. Has had his choral and instrumental works performed throughout Canada, the USA and Australia. He holds degrees from William and Mary and the University of Washington.

Warren Furman-Montrose, PA., www.hitecharts.com. Modernistic electronic music with a lyrical quality.

James Cohn-Newark, NJ. A traditionalist with credentials dating back to Julliard in 1950. Studied with Roy Harris and Bernard Wagenaar.

Michelle Diehl-Sioux Falls, SD., www.michellediehl.org. Another young talented composer who is receiving invitations, commissions and performance opportunities throughout the USA. Much of her work is for strings.

Alain Mayrand-Burnaby, BC, Canada. www.alainmayrand.com. A well-rounded instrumentalist with a composing propensity for rhythm, expressiveness of melody and fun orchestral colors.

Rebecca Lloyd - New York, NY. www.rebeccalloyd.com. Has extensive film credits and connections all over the world. Her degrees are from schools in Australia and her work is high energy, rhythmic music ranging from common practice examples to experimental and even World Music of many cultures. She is a lady on the move!

- The persons mentioned above share the websites of Classical Lounge, (www.classicallounge.com) and/or Classical Matters (www.classicalmatters.com) designed by Terry Williams, a very talented and supportive classical music enthusiast) and are actively contributing to our world of classical music by composing interesting pieces in several different genres and styles. They are talented and energetic folks.

- Absolute Music, Program Music and Organized Sound: My works-

1) Absolute Music: Music for its own sake leads to listening for pleasure, mood, backgrounds to other media, at concerts, recitals and movie or video presentations. Traditional forms of previous eras (binary, ternary, rondo, sonata allegro, theme and variations, contrapuntal forms and song form (expanded ternary)).

2) Programmatic Music:

Music that is tied to the written word can be poetic or can tell a story but can also be Liturgical or can be a larger work such as Opera or the Mass. In my music, it also may simply be descriptive of or generated by images.

3) Abstract or Experimental Music:

Widely explored in the Twentieth Century and still popular today in certain genres of modern composition, this music is, in my view, largely organized sound, sometimes generated by acoustic instruments, sometimes by electronic instruments and often using the electronic devices as the instrument itself rather than as a tool. (Random Music examples from my youth used a deck of cards, an alarm clock a guitar pick-up with a grand piano and often a reel to reel tape recorder).

- Organization of my works:

General techniques include a balance of unity and variety; traditional and experimental (see my blog on www.edwolfemusic.com "Tradition is a Key to Current Compositions"); and finally acoustic and electronic. As I begin a new composition, I generally make a thematic outline of the work or movement with an approximate key (or at least tonal center) scheme. From this outline, a form for the piece or movement usually emerges. I try to write without the aid of a keyboard or other external device (to continue to train my ear and add a limitation on myself that will focus the work I have begun). Periodic checks on my piano or keyboard (if a figure is in doubt) will occur. In general I employ the following concepts:

1) Melody-May be consonant or dissonant; may exhibit tonality or a lack of tonality; and finally it may follow the accepted rules of melody writing (from the common practice

period of composition) or deliberately relax or even destroy those rules; but may sometimes be serial (twelve-tone) or perhaps even have some elements of chance.

2) Harmony-Consonant or dissonant; tonal or not; traditional voice leading concepts but relaxed; triadic or modern; contrapuntal or point to point; perhaps some chance harmonies or clusters, even serial. (Usually, when my melody is tonal, the harmony is adventuresome and when the melody is dissonant, harmony tends to be more traditional. I also like the use of open intervals in chords, less often clusters).

3) Rhythm-Perhaps the most important component, it can be traditional or standardized with known meters and pulses using “tuplets”, “hemiola”, polyrhythms and sometimes sound layering. Sometimes “call and response” patterns are introduced as well as recalls, premonitions and quotes from other sources. (An analysis of rhythms to be used in my outline is often useful, and particularly in my choral works, a rhythm score based on the text is completed before even one note is written).

4) Form-I tend to stay close to established forms for my absolute music, but in the other two genres, the forms might be relaxed, linear, free or even non existent. (Rhythm and Form can be major components in adding unity to my works).

5) Orchestration-I make use of colors, groupings of sound, section work, solo work, instruments and voice, voice leading (appropriate to the ability of the instrument or voice and ranges of the instrument and voice) as well as transposition of ideas to other voices or instruments and seasonings of percussion. (Orchestration and arranging is really fun once you get the hang of it!).

6) Nuances- Dynamics, articulations, special effects, ornaments, changes in tempo and meter (and shifting accents) can bring a line to life. Here is an area of experimentation and even exploitation (with taste please).

• Program Music-How we observe our surroundings:

1) Snapshots-Think about how you see your world. Is it like mine; a series of perspectives and scenes with or without motion? Eyes move quickly from one scene to another mostly without “panning” (as a camera might in the motion pictures).

2) Deliberate panning eye movement-similar to a “movie or video” camera; a slow continues movement including a linear motion from one perspective to another.

3) Our other senses-touch, smell, taste, hearing and whatever “sixth sense” one might possess (or think one might possess). The concrete senses can, with imagination, lead to the production of a sound or sounds appropriate to the description of one's surroundings and or feelings; a truly magical journey. Imagination is the key and a thorough understanding or command of your craft is the vehicle.

• “Teton Sketches”-Background:

Warren Gref (artistic director of the Golden Valley Music Society in Temecula, CA) and I first met when he came to the University of New Mexico as the new horn instructor. I was working on my M.M. degree in composition while teaching instrumental music in the Albuquerque Public Schools. (It was an interesting time in those days and Warren's hair was shoulder length, my beard had disappeared and my mustache made me look rather dapper!.... (Ok, so I never looked dapper). As soon as I heard him perform, I knew that I had to have him in my brass quintet, so I re-formed the Albuquerque Brass Quintet (not to be confused with the New Mexico Brass Ensemble formed by James Whitlow in the 50's and still in existence) and put together a library of music appropriate for educational presentations, weddings, church gigs and other concert settings. Playing in that group with Warren, Ray, Jeff and Evan was a highlight of my week each and every week. Warren and I left Albuquerque at approximately the same time; Warren and his wife Ann to perform in San Diego and I to teach in San Dimas. Those thirty years went by fairly quickly and along the way, Nancy (my wife) and I were privileged to have Warren and the San Diego Symphony Brass Quintet perform at our wedding ceremony in Simi Valley.

Upon my retirement last Spring, I began searching the web for “old” friends and found many of the folks I had known in my past including Johnny Cheetham, Ron Lipka, Sam Trimble and Warren Gref. When I e-mailed Warren, he asked, almost in passing, if I had any works for chamber orchestra. I did not, but quietly went to work on a project that I had wanted to write since our vacation to Yellowstone in 2002.

- The Project: Teton Sketches for “smallish” chamber orchestra.

My “visual representations” in the writing of my compositions, (heavily influenced by masters of programmatic music, Richard Strauss and Richard Wagner), tend not to tell a story, but to describe snapshots or sketches of things that I observe in nature or in my “mind's eye”. My masters thesis “Caverna” is a musical tour through Carlsbad Caverns in Southern New Mexico and has recently been re-scored for wind ensemble with the new title, “Formations”. With each new “snapshot” of a formation, melodic material, harmonic textures and instrumental timbers change. With the entire journey, one feels a movement from place to place with recollections of scenes that had been witnessed earlier in the tour as a unifying thread. So it was with “Teton Sketches” as well.

As my wife and I traveled across Utah, not much in the way of musical interest was occurring, but just North of Salt Lake City, there began to appear a line, just a purple trace of a rather impressive mountain range. The range was dark and far away. I had never been to Wyoming before and had no idea what musical treasures would emerge during the next three days. As we approached Jackson Hole, however, details of the grandeur and magnificence were everywhere. The range had acquired detail, icebergs, crevices, water falls, trees, boulders and wildlife. Jackson Hole itself was a trip! Western influence, Indian culture, wildlife taxidermy and, oh yes, antlers! Antlers were everywhere...entryways to parks, arches above doorways, trophies on the walls and sold in the stores!

The ride to the top on the tramway was spectacular and the view of Jackson Hole and the surrounding valley from the peak was grand indeed. No wonder these youngest of all mountain ranges, the Cascades were called the Grand Tetons! What majesty, what power, but, I digress....

In this setting, the mind races and the creative juices flow. I was taking mental “snapshots” (as well as filmed ones) freely. The next day we arrived at “the lodge”. The lobby was huge! The bar was huge! The rooms were huge, but nothing compared with the view. You see, the entire Western wall of the lodge was a window, a panoramic view of miles and miles of majestic mountains! The lobby had comfortable chairs and lounges (all facing West) and the bar next to the lobby had a continuation of the window with the opportunity to sit at tables (facing West). Just outside was a massive patio with chairs, tables and lounges (most of which were facing West). And just to the West of the patio was...the lake! And what a lake it was. It seemed to run into and bump the mountain itself. It was huge with birds...thousands of them... and people...thousands of them!

One cannot help remembering our American History and the buffalo hunters, the trappers, Bill Cody, the cowboys and Indians of our youth who now had become “western folk” and “Native Americans”. Tourists were busily snapping pictures of everything. But I (people stared strangely) was drawing staff lines on a piece of tablet borrowed from the bar tender (my manuscript tools were in my luggage) and there was not a moment to waste. I had to get some melodic material down. So, there I sat. At the bar with my diet Coke writing melodies and annotating visual impressions while people stared, shook their heads, and put in a new roll of 35 MM film!

- The Music:

The themes written and an outline of the form noted, we moved on to Yellowstone with my visual “snapshots” filed away in my “mind's eye” for viewing another day. When Warren asked about my work for a “smallish” chamber orchestra, I looked through my notes of unfinished works and the melodies of that previous visualization leapt off the pages of that now yellow tablet with the hand drawn staves. I set about putting it together. I now had the tools to work at a quicker pace than “in the old days”. My software and new MAC took the place of my Osmiroid pen and onion skin paper. No more blueprints were required. I would just use my printer!

The introduction was easy: a dark image of a distant group of mountains outlined against a clear blue sky...“purple mountain's majesty” and all that. The emergence of detail gave rise to the movement of the wildlife (seen and imagined) and the imitations of the fugue-ette began to emerge. Bill Cody was leading expeditions to fight the “Native Americans”. Fur trappers were hiking into the mountain passes to avoid the law. The “Native Americans” were dealing with the trappers in their own unique way, and plotted against the “western folk”. Yep, each snapshot was clear. Majestic formations kept getting in the way. Trumpet and horn fanfares crept into the serene string passages almost abruptly and seemingly out of place. The darkness of the night gave rise to dark keys (seven flats instead of five sharps with adjusted tendency tuning of the musicians on their

instruments...that would do the trick!). The dance of the “folks” in the town halls of nearby towns at twilight and into the evening, (but an uneven, not polished dance) filled the night air with excitement and merriment. No formality here. Just plain folks having a good time and, yes momentary recall of previous “snapshots”. That's the ticket! That's “Teton Sketches”.

- Questions and Answers-(I will stay as long as you wish).
-Ed Wolfe, 2008